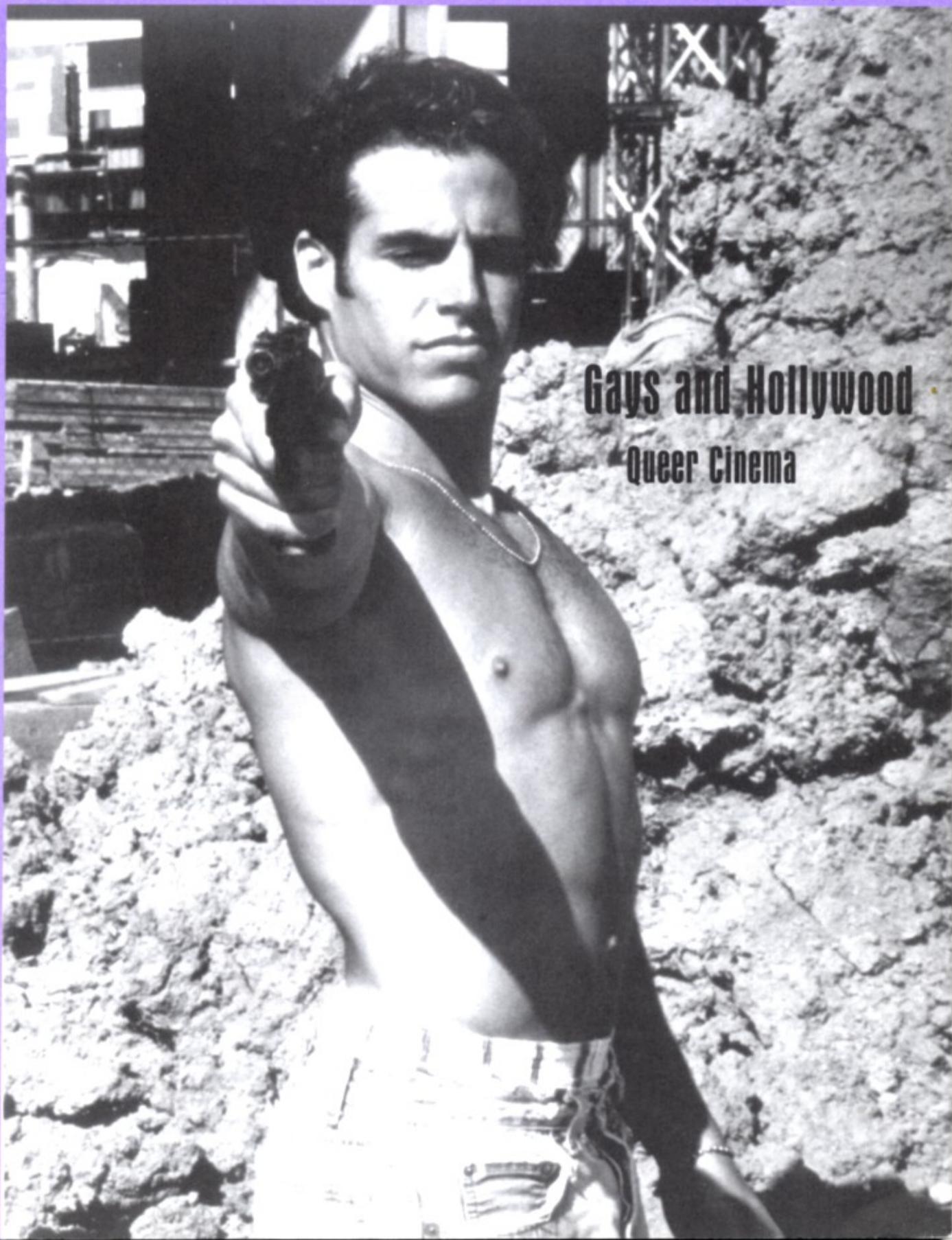


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NO. 35 \$7

RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY



**Gays and Hollywood
Queer Cinema**

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by Patrick Crowe

FRONT COVER: *The Living End*

BACK COVER: Montgomery Clift

STILLS: Cinematheque Ontario, Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive and the individual authors.

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THE COLLECTIVE

Kass Banning
Scott Forsyth
Florence Jacobowitz
Richard Lippe
Susan Morrison
Robin Wood

DESIGN

Julie Jenkinson

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George Cukor's *A Star Is Born*

Editorial

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall riot, and we are happy to present this issue in acknowledgement of that decisive event in the evolution of gay culture.

We want to express a commitment both to the emerging 'New Queer Cinema' and to progressive work within the mainstream. In the former, the gay community is beginning to develop its filmic identity. Gays and lesbians have many stories to tell and many issues to raise; gay history as it has been (and is continuing to be) lived is very much in need of documentation, whether the form is fiction, documentary or the *avant-garde*. But these films primarily address and reach a gay audience, and while we acknowledge the importance of this, we are equally interested in the ways in which gay characters and gay issues are beginning to reach the heterosexual mainstream. The widespread tendency of radical critics simply to reject Hollywood (past and present) as reactionary by definition seems to us counter-productive. A film like *Frankie and Johnny* (1991), for example, has value in its relaxed and open depiction of a gay couple.

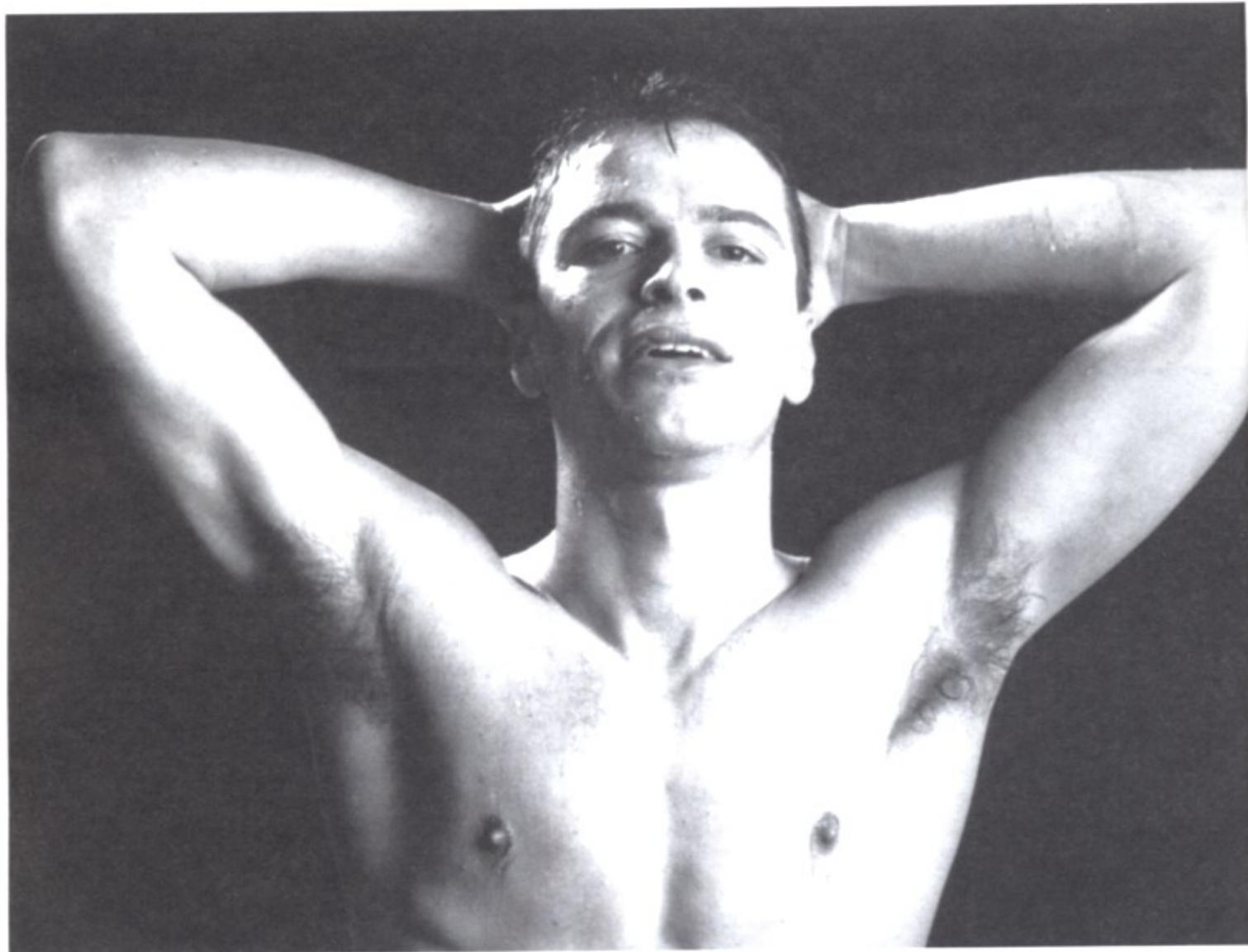
It was never our intention to exclude lesbians from this issue, though unfortunately the result may give that impression. The term 'gay' (like the currently popular 'queer') is commonly used to refer to people of both sexes, and if we had received distinguished work by or about lesbians we would have accepted it. We have also suggested to the collective that there should be a 'lesbian' issue to balance the present one.

We have not restricted ourselves to films with gay themes. We wanted also to celebrate the work of two great directors working within the constraints of a production code that forbade the 'speaking' of gayness, but whose work is commonly perceived as exemplifying the (to us somewhat problematic) notion of a 'gay sensibility'. One of the outstanding characteristics of both Cukor and Minnelli was their ability to empathize with female characters and to collaborate sensitively with female stars. The inclusion of the article on *Meet Me in St. Louis* (which we believe is published here for the first time in North America) also allows us to pay homage once again to our favourite film critic, the late Andrew Britton.

Richard Lippe and Robin Wood.

The **NEW** Queer Cinema and Gay Culture:

NOTES FROM AN OUTSIDER



The end of John Greyson's *Zero Patience*: 'an authentic and liberating intensity'.

An Irresponsible Article

by Robin Wood.¹

This article makes no pretence at being 'exhaustive', 'comprehensive', 'definitive', etc... For one thing it covers only one small area of the recent proliferation of what everyone now seems to want to call 'Queer' cinema: certain films by John Greyson, Laurie Lynd and Gregg Araki. For another it is (as my work has always been but has become increasingly) unashamedly personal, and is written from a position that many will be reluctant to recognize (its opinions will probably be found, again, 'at best idiosyncratic, at worst offensive'). I believe strongly in the validity - even necessity - of speaking our own histories, of 'exposing oneself', at least in the metaphorical sense: first to ourselves, to be clear where we have come from and where we wish to go, and then to others in order that such histories can be shared: personal history is also *social* history. I also believe that a critical position must develop organically out of this personal history and not be forced upon it (or *against* it) because we want to be accepted, because we want to 'belong' to whatever are the dominant tendencies, or because we wish to be 'politically correct'. I believe - within the present state of things, within the current struggles of gays and lesbians for full social recognition and acceptance - above all in the need for multiplicity. There is no reason why gay people should all speak with the same voice (provided they can come together at moments of crisis, and in opposition to all forms of oppression). I think we need to learn to listen to many different voices, and to respect the validity of different positions, provided they are honest and are not opposed to us. As Fidel Castro famously put it (though not, alas, in the context of gay liberation): 'Within the revolution, everything. Against the revolution, nothing.'

I deal here explicitly with gay males, but much of what I want to say can be (suitably qualified) applied to lesbians, and I hope they won't feel excluded.

¹ Almost twenty years ago I delivered my 'coming out' lecture, called 'Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic', at London's National Film Theatre; it was published in *Film Comment* (Jan./Feb. 1978) and has been reprinted in *Movies and Methods II*, University of California Press, 1985.

Personal.

Despite the fact that I have been openly gay for twenty-five years now and have foregrounded this as a major component of both my writing and my teaching, I have come to feel that there is no real space for me in the 'mainstream' of gay culture, that I live and work and fight only on its fringes and in an uneasy relation to it. The problem seems to derive from a difference of background, hence a consequent difference of aim, of *vision*. I have the greatest respect for most of what an aggressive organization like ACT UP or an aggressive movement like Queer Nation is doing and achieving: such aggressiveness is currently necessary. But these are concerned, exclusively and quite appropriately, with immediate goals; my overriding concern is with what happens *after* those goals have been achieved - with the possibility of a human future that I shall certainly not live to see realized.

I was born in 1931 into a middle-class British family within which the word 'sex' was never spoken (except in phrases like 'the opposite sex', 'the gentle sex'). I had no idea how babies were conceived until the age of twelve, when the headmaster of my school took me into his study and gave me (I can still remember his hands trembling) his ritual explanation, which left me with a vague sense - which endured for several years more - that the woman had to hold some mysterious part of herself open while you peed into her. Needless to say, within such a context homosexuality didn't exist: there was quite simply no such thing. I have traced my homosexual impulses back to the age of six, and by the age of twelve (no later, perhaps earlier) I was having the most elaborate and exotic-erotic fantasies about men (always men, never boys). I had no way of accounting for these to myself, no word to describe them, though I *did* have a sense that to anyone else they would seem disgusting and that I must be very sick (which never stopped me indulging them). I had no suspicion that there might be other people like me in the world until - I think around the age of fifteen - I discovered the word 'homosexual' in a biography of Tchaikovsky (appropriately enough my favourite composer at that time). But this only made things worse: it was offered as the reason for Tchaikovsky's anguish (the 6th Symphony, I subsequently discovered, was commonly referred to as 'the homosexual tragedy'), and there was no suggestion that the blame might be put on social pressures and prejudices: if one was 'homosexual' one was doomed to inevitable misery, not to mention eternal damnation.

One memory that remains to this day extremely vivid to me may help also to make vivid to today's readers the horror and misery of those years - and may also remind them that in many areas of our own culture (let alone other cultures) such situations are still not uncommon. When I was about fifteen I had to share a bedroom for a period with a brother twelve years older than myself, and he told me repeatedly that I talked in my sleep. I was terrified: I instantly jumped to the conclusion that I'd been revealing all the 'obscene' and 'disgusting' details of my

rich fantasy life, my only *real* life. This assumption became an obsession, haunting me all day. I could no longer look my brother in the face (he was himself one of my objects of desire - everyone said he looked like Tyrone Power - the others all being either imaginary or on the screen); my great fear was that he would tell our parents. So, every night when I felt myself ready to fall asleep, I would bunch up a corner of the bedsheet and cram as much of it as I could into my mouth. Of course when I woke up it had all come out, and the terror and shame began again.

The point of all this is to try to help readers of younger generations (the younger the more emancipated) understand why I spent the first two-thirds of my life trying to learn heterosexuality, and why I lived a heterosexual 'lifestyle' until I was almost forty. Many of the present generation of young gay men find this very difficult to grasp: to them my history will seem a fairy-tale, whereas to me it remains a tangible reality. Even in my university years I never really believed that there was even so much as a gay subculture somewhere 'out there', and I would certainly never have dared to search for it even if I had: I never really believed that there were other people like me - or, if there were, they must be equally sick and monstrous. I 'knew' that no one would ever want to associate with me again if they discovered my secret. When I finally 'confessed', for the first time to anyone, to my best friend (in a letter, after we'd graduated and were living far apart), his response was generous and accepting; but by then my self-loathing was so deeply and thoroughly internalized that I could never really face him again, and our relationship was never the same. (It has been resumed, happily and unexpectedly, some forty years later, in correspondence: he is the author of the article on *Through a Glass Darkly* published in the last issue).

Inevitably I began 'dating' women, and even became engaged to one for a few weeks, but I discovered that I could work up no sexual interest in them whatever and so - equally inevitably - the relationships came to nothing. I realize now, of course, that if I had confided in them we might have become intimate friends, but to me at that time such a thing was *literally* unimaginable.

When I was twenty-nine I managed to have sex with another human being for the first time, and within a year we were married; in the interim I had told her all about myself, but I presented it in terms of wanting to be 'saved'. For ten years we had what all our friends regarded (many with envy) as a 'perfect' marriage, and on the surface it was. (Women regarded me as an 'ideal' husband because I was more than willing to bathe babies, change diapers, cook dinners, and assist at childbirths). But as those years went on I came to the realization that I was never going to be 'saved': sexual intercourse was never more than an ordeal I had to go through, and my 'real' sexual life remained on the level of fantasy. I consulted psychiatrists twice, and was offered 'aversion therapy', which I'm glad to say I rejected with disgust and anger. (It occurs to me

now that, although the 'terrible secret' of my adolescence was such a constant torment, it's really very fortunate that I *didn't* confide in anyone: I can see clearly what I would probably have been put through). However, I never thought of myself as a 'closet case' exactly: I take that term to mean someone who leads a secret sexual life which he carefully conceals from the rest of the world, and (fantasy aside) I remained strictly monogamous. And, in so many ways, I greatly enjoyed the 'heterosexual' family life which I'd accepted and cultivated: I loved my wife in every way except the sexual (I still believe that, within a different cultural/ideological environment, we could have continued to have a wonderful friendship); and I loved our three children.

In Britain, until 1960, any homosexual act, even between consenting adults in private, was punishable by sentences of up to ten years in prison, and various 'scandals' showed that the law could be and sometimes was enforced. It was repealed, ironically, within a few months of my marriage and, while this didn't affect my outward behaviour, it made an enormous difference to me psychologically: the sign that society was beginning to accept homosexuality was also the beginning of my acceptance of myself. The process that started there culminated in my first sexual experience with a man, at the age of thirty-nine, from which there was no turning back. The whole life that I had constructed fell apart, and a new life had to be built.

I'm fully aware that many find these personal revelations embarrassing and unnecessary, but I don't think my current position - not only in relation to 'queer cinema' and gay culture, but to art and life in general - can be properly understood without them. Aside from sex itself, I fully succeeded in my aim of 'learning' heterosexuality: I didn't realize that there was anything else to learn. I became completely immersed in the mainstream heterosexual/patriarchal culture, and especially in its amazingly rich and complex artistic achievements over many centuries: its literature, its music, its cinema. I have to say that I'm very glad of this: without it, my life would feel most dreadfully impoverished. I really cannot imagine what my life would be without, let us say, Mozart and Stravinsky, Shakespeare and Tolstoy, Ozu and Renoir (the list could of course be extended indefinitely): they are all *present* for me, as components of my psychological and emotional makeup, my attitudes, the way I relate to people, my daily life. All of this - all I have written here so far - has a number of consequences for my work:

1. While the impulse of most critics today who announce themselves as 'radical' or 'progressive' appears to be to *reject* as much of the past as possible, my own impulse is to *accept* (while trying to rethink) as much as possible.

2. I still feel myself essentially *a part of* the mainstream culture that produced me, while most gay, or 'politically

correct', critics feel alienated from it.

3. As an openly gay film critic, while I am always delighted when gay people like my work, I have always wanted primarily to address a heterosexual readership. (I might here, parenthetically, reverse the familiar cliché and confess that 'Some of my best friends are heterosexual'; more than 'some', actually - it's about 50/50). I can fully understand the importance of writing for a gay audience, whether on the level of 'cheering them up' or of 'urging them on'. But for me there are more far-reaching issues involved (I return to this later).

4. Most gay or 'radical' critics today watch films like *Making Love* and *Philadelphia* - or, at the other end of the spectrum, *Zero Patience* - with the eyes of gay activists, demanding a movie made for *them*. I can understand, and partially share, that vision. Yet I am also able to watch these films with the eyes of a middle-class 'heterosexual' - which I suppose is why I value them so differently, being equally appalled by the total lack of generosity on the one hand, the reckless and (to me) misguided enthusiasm on the other. In short, the criteria that I apply to these films are somewhat different from (and I think more complex than) those that most gay activists seem to apply.

5. More generally (though this clearly affects my work): I can certainly share the outrage of the younger generation of gays when the bill put forward by Ontario's quasi-socialist government proposing that gay and lesbian couples be granted equal human rights with heterosexual couples was defeated (by 58 to 49). But my personal anger, while real enough (the defeat reinforcing the injustices of centuries), is inevitably qualified by my past history: by my astonishment that the adolescent who once crammed sheets into his mouth to prevent himself from speaking his gayness in his sleep should find himself living in a culture where such a bill is even *imagined*, let alone proposed as law and only narrowly defeated: astonishment at the strides that have been made in the last fifty years, despite all the setbacks. This is why I am perhaps more optimistic about the future than many contemporary gay activists (to judge from their despairing remarks) seem to be. Of course, they are young: they want full human rights now, for themselves - the rights that I have only recently learned to believe that I have the 'right' to - and I can empathize strongly with that. But I also dream of what our culture *may* be like in another fifty years, long after I am dead.

6. This also explains, I think, why I am so moved by a film like *Philadelphia* (generally vilified in the gay press with, as far as I know, only one honourable exception²): from a radical gay activist viewpoint a film seriously flawed, but a sincere and intelligent attempt to present major contemporary gay issues (AIDS and homophobia) to a mainstream heterosexual audience in a way they will be able to accept.

² Don Hannah in Toronto's *Astra*, December 24th, 1993 - an admirably just and balanced account of the film.

Some Thoughts on Contemporary Gay Culture.

I now tread on even more dangerous ground, but I find it necessary if I am to present my position honestly: the logical corollary of my commitment (however critical, interrogatory and subversive) to the mainstream. I should say at once that I blame my sense of (partial) exclusion from the mainstream of gay culture *neither* on gay culture *nor* on myself: it is a matter of the kinds of difference that arise from the personal/social history I have outlined, and my obstinate belief that my position, even if it deviates (in some respects drastically) from what now appear the 'norms' of 'Queer' culture, should be allowed its validity within what *ought* to be a pluralist, non-exclusive, ongoing struggle.

a. Terminology and Language.

I read English at Cambridge University, England. I am not 'broadcasting' this for its snob appeal but because it is another fact of my background. I have learned to be very sensitive to language, and to the (social) meaning of words, at both the denotative and connotative levels. This is the preface to saying that I am as unhappy with the words that we currently allow to represent homosexuality as I am with those that represent race. And I don't think words can be cleansed of their long-encrusted connotations. D.H. Lawrence tried it in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, by deliberately and repeatedly using the word 'fuck' in its literal sense. He failed: witness almost any American movie of the last two decades, or most conversations overheard today on the street. 'Fuck' is still an obscenity, and if we want to talk positively and cleanly about vaginal or anal intercourse we shall have to coin a new word. Despite the anger my proposal to replace 'black' and 'white' with 'brown' and 'pink' has provoked in some quarters, I still regard 'black' and 'white' as deeply and incorrigibly racist terms (they are also profoundly divisive, suggesting polar opposites): I don't believe that 'black' will ever be cleansed of its accumulated connotations of 'evil', 'darkness', 'night', as against 'good', 'purity', 'day', 'light'. I continue lazily to use 'black' and 'white' just as I continue to use 'gay' and even the highly unfortunate 'straight' - automatically, because they are a part of the contemporary vocabulary. But when I use them I feel uneasy.

'Queer': I don't think I am especially peculiar. I find many heterosexuals every bit as queer as I am (and some a hell of a lot queerer). 'Gay': I am *sometimes* gay; often I am depressed and miserable. I also don't feel any more 'crooked' or 'bent' (the opposite of 'straight') than anyone else - why should I? I hate all these terms, yet I feel stuck with them: they have been foisted on me by my culture, including (and particularly) 'gay' culture.

I can see that the contemporary use of 'queer' has (like the contemporary use of 'black') important political ramifications, as a term of defiance. I also find it personally insulting and politically divisive (again like 'black' and 'white', suggestive of irreconcilable opposition). I can accept that this is a necessary phase through which gay

culture must pass: that, in our present embattled circumstances, it is politically useful for gay people to define themselves as 'queer' in order to insist on their right to be in certain respects different - just as, at present, brown persons feel the need to call themselves 'black' even though they aren't, and just as feminists often feel the need to exclude men from some of their gatherings and debates. But shouldn't our acceptance of these terms be strictly provisional? Shouldn't we also be looking ahead to a culture of true equality and liberation in which difference is accepted and valued, and in which people can come together again? I am as passionately opposed to separatism (except as a temporary political expedient) as I am to the 'liberal' notion that we're all really the same. What we must eventually learn to do is to understand and accept one another's difference, on all levels: those of race, gender and sexual orientation, but also the differences of position (based always on personal histories) within the corresponding movements. And, also, accept difference on the personal level, really (since 'Charity begins at home') the primary one: that the person with whom we live may not *exactly* slot in to the image of our desire (which is of course merely a projection of our own ego). In short, we must learn to respect, honour and *love* difference: love people *because* they are different from ourselves. In our culture this is a very tall order: everyone seems to want his/her partner to be exactly what suits him/her. But when we learn to love difference at the personal level we shall much more easily reach out to accept, and love, difference over wider areas.

There are other features of gay language that I find repellent: the notion of the 'trick', the notion of 'scoring' (the latter, at least, surely taken over, quite uncritically, from heterosexual culture). I should set right here a possible misconception arising from the personal history outlined. Many may have jumped to the conclusion that, in passing from a 'traditional' family life to a 'homosexual lifestyle', I have simply (as far as is possible) re-created the former in the latter, 'heterosexualizing' gay relationships. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Even when I lived it, I never really believed in monogamy: it always seemed to me unnatural, and somewhat ridiculous. And I could never understand why we organize our lives and our relationships around sex, taking it as the touchstone of everything: why should making love with someone other than the person you live with be the definition of 'infidelity'? And why should we assume (as we are taught to) that a person with whom we share a sexual passion must be the person we want to share our lives with? It is all totally irrational, and amounts to an extraordinary overvaluation of the importance of the sexual act, which should simply be taken for granted the way we take eating, drinking or sleeping for granted: a part of our daily lives. Far from wishing to disparage 'casual', 'anonymous' sex, it is a practice I have embraced with great enthusiasm ever since I 'came out': I don't keep 'score' of my sexual partners mainly because I don't think in those terms, but also

because I probably can't count that far. I have never once thought of my partner - even in the dark, in a ten-minute encounter - as a 'trick', or of myself as 'scoring' (Bridge being another enjoyable, but completely separate, part of my life). I have always been aware of sharing pleasure (or, but surprisingly rarely, unpleasure) with another human being, whom I have never wished to demean, dehumanize or objectify.

Many will find this sordid in the extreme; I am fascinated by its beauty: the moment of intimate sharing, with another human, the moment when all boundaries are broken down; sharing with someone I might not recognize if I passed him in the street the next day, someone whose company I might not, in other forms of intercourse, be able to tolerate for more than ten minutes; the sense of a shared rock-bottom humanity, at the level of the orgasm, when it wouldn't matter - just for that moment - if he was a neo-Nazi or a member of the Ku Klux Klan: the sense of a fundamental human brotherhood that underlies all the massive and terrible differences that separate us in daily life, in the light. I don't think I am rationalizing if I say that, to me, this is above all a *spiritual* experience. Of course, I have always to remember that, to my partner, I may be just another 'trick'... This seems to me the *true* importance of sex: something that draws people together rather than separates them, splits them off into isolated couples and 'nuclear families'.

b. 'Camp' and 'Drag'

My attitude to 'camp' - which seems still to figure so prominently in gay culture, though I often wonder if the prominence is more myth than reality, all my gay friends seeming to share my view - is almost totally negative: its tendency seems exclusively to trivialize. I can see, very clearly, how important 'camp' has been in the past (and remains, for those who are still forced into alienation and isolation - see Patrick Crowe on *Paris Is Burning* later in this issue): important to embattled gays striving toward an identity, alienated from heterosexual culture but having nothing else, discovering that (hideously impoverished) identity in ridicule. But surely 'camp' is becoming obsolete, in a culture in which the rights of same-sex couples can be seriously considered.

'Camp' trivializes: that is precisely its function. It tells us that the last two thousand years of civilization need not be taken seriously because, within those years, homosexuals have been denigrated, scorned, imprisoned, beaten with baseball bats, and burnt at (or around) the stake (at being reserved for 'witches', i.e. women who did not wish to be subordinated to men). 'Camp' is purely defensive, a means of survival, and as such it has obviously had an importance to many people (and still has, in places like 'Sudbury', a name that seems to have taken on mythic dimensions, in Canadian culture, as not so much a town as the epitome of the conservative and reactionary). But, as the gay movement continues to establish itself as a positive dynamic force, the growing obsolescence of 'camp' should also be acknowledged.

The influence of 'camp' on gay lives and sensibilities has been (survival apart) almost entirely negative and mystificatory. We are told, for example, that John Wayne is 'camp'. As a response to Wayne's public image (as macho-fascist-imperialist) this clearly has its point, its satirical purpose. But what of the many distinguished films in which he's appeared? Are we to giggle our way through *Red River*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *The Searchers*, *Rio Bravo*? And if this is the case, what are we losing? - some of the finest and most complex products of what now appears, beyond dispute, one of the richest areas of art in the twentieth century, the 'classical Hollywood cinema'.

I have no difficulty in accepting that various Betty Grable/Alice Faye/Carmen Miranda musicals are 'camp': that is how they were made, and one cannot trivialize the already trivial. But when masterpieces like *The Scarlet Empress*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *Beyond the Forest* are trivialized as 'camp' it is time to protest. 'Camp' in this context becomes a blatant strategy of screening oneself from emotional pain, from the disturbing power of these films. And the time for screening oneself has passed: to deal with pain you have first to allow yourself to experience it.

My attitude to 'drag' follows from the above, as it appears inseparably bound up with 'camp'. But I think there is an important distinction to be made between terms that are frequently elided: 'drag queen', 'female impersonator', 'transvestite': even if the distinction is an artificial one (obviously one person can be all three). Female impersonators' belong to 'camp' without qualification: they insult and trivialize the stars they imitate (or more precisely parody). 'Bette Davis' and 'Judy Garland' are complex and multi-dimensional personae which bear important cultural meanings; 'camp' reduces these to a few superficial mannerisms. The distinction I want to make between 'drag queens' and 'transvestites' is admittedly a difficult and precarious one, but it seems worth attempting. The 'drag queen' dresses as a woman - a *parody* of a woman - for laughs; the 'feminine' (or perhaps more precisely 'effeminate') mannerisms are supposed to be funny. The true transvestite - whom I completely respect - dresses as a woman in order to express his femininity, because he is courageous enough to acknowledge it: with him, 'drag' loses all overtones of parody and becomes, essentially, a political statement about gender. (I am fully aware that, in practice, the distinction is impossible - the boundary is too uncertain and shadowy, and the element of parody in the 'drag queen' may be simply an uneasy defence, concealing the fear of an authentic 'femininity'. Yet the principle seems to me worth establishing).

To draw the logical conclusion from what has been said so far: I see an analogy between people who wish to commit themselves to 'gay culture' and people who wish to commit themselves to 'Canadian culture' - with the

corollary that everything beyond those claustrophobic walls is 'the enemy'. The result can only be the most extreme spiritual impoverishment. Of course, however powerful the wish, its realization is quite simply an impossibility: whether we like it or not, we are (Canadian or gay or both) profoundly inscribed within the evolving culture of Western civilization, and if we try to deny this we are (a) lying and (b) doing ourselves immense psychic harm. The alternative is simple: to accept, but rewrite, the rich culture that we have been fortunate enough to have inherited.

The (Possible) Future and Function of Gay Liberation.

I now come (before at last discussing some films) to the crux and core of this article, and I am fully aware that what I am about to say is 'politically' very dangerous: it could be taken up by the Right and used as a weapon against us. Yet I feel it has to be said: it is what I believe 'gay liberation' is all about.

Gay culture (see for example various published reactions to our exhilarating Gay Pride Day extravaganzas) is often accused of being too 'radical'. This seems to mean that we don't always behave sufficiently like nice, respectable, middle-class, white heterosexual persons; if we did (the implication is) we could gain acceptance into that wonderful, contented world of happy white middle-class heterosexuals, with their happy marriages and their happy nuclear families and their wonderful sexual arrangements, i.e. monogamy-plus-'cheating'. My own feeling is that gay culture has never (very disappointingly) become radical (*without* quotation marks) enough. I have long seen the gay movement not only in terms of gay liberation, but as the potential vanguard of the liberation of our civilization. This agenda involves, not so much acceptance within heterosexual culture as it exists, as the redemption and redefinition of culture itself, involving the radical reorganization of society, and specifically of our essentially obsolete social/sexual/familial norms.

1. 'Family Values'. I want to make it clear that I am not against 'the family' - in some form. I am simply against the notion of family that (despite the daily reports of horrors - the ever-rising divorce rate, wife-beating, child abuse in all its forms) remains dominant in our culture: the patriarchal nuclear family. The fact that it is in a state of advanced disintegration is precisely the reason why it is today so passionately and hysterically defended: if it wasn't, why bother? But anyone who can read or think (a category that instantly excludes, apparently, anyone on the Right, or they couldn't remain there) has known for a long time that the patriarchal (add capitalist) nuclear family is quite simply a breeding-ground of neurosis, out of which most of the mental disorders so pervasive in our culture develop. When the same-sex bill was proposed, the main line of attack from the Right was that we would undermine 'family values'. I very much hope that this is the case: if it isn't, we should be ashamed of ourselves.

The patriarchal nuclear family, even on the rare occasions when it appears to work (i.e. when its members believe themselves to be happy) has as its function the perpetuation of patriarchal/heterosexual culture (I know: I've been there). This is of course the reason why heterosexual males of the older generation, and the women they have intimidated, defend it with such hysteria. Its function is, one might say, to produce 'real men' and REAL women, and to perpetuate the misery to which such people seem perversely committed.

2. 'Promiscuity'. A 'bad' word, of course, like 'nymphomania': no one wants to be regarded as 'promiscuous'; no woman wants to be a 'nymphomaniac'. But what about 'relating freely'? Sounds better? More acceptable? It can of course in practice mean exactly the same thing. On the other hand, it doesn't *have* to: that's the beauty of it. It can *include* sex, but it doesn't necessarily insist on sex, and is not restricted to it as the defining term. Can't we look forward to a society where we can all 'relate freely' to each other? - a society, in other words, in which 'sex' is no longer the defining factor or organizing principle of a relationship; in which the boundary between terms like 'friend' and 'lover' disintegrates, because it *doesn't matter any more* whether you have or have not 'had sex'? A society, in fact, which at last accepts sex as a natural and legitimate daily activity, like eating and drinking. This would mean the end of jealousy and possessiveness; ultimately, it might lead on beyond that to the breaking down of the heterosexual/homosexual opposition. Everyone would be set free to relate to everyone else as they pleased, every relationship being determined by its own internal dynamic and not by externally imposed rules. This need not at all imply the end of committed and permanent relationships; it would simply make it possible to have them with a number of people instead of just one, whether they were 'sexual' or not, which would no longer be an issue. Think of the marriage contract: 'Till death do us part' seems to me a profoundly beautiful promise, 'Forsaking all others' a profoundly foolish and repressive one. The former would also be so much easier to keep, were it released from the constraints and pressures of exclusivity.

3. 'Family/Community'. The above implies many things. Certainly an end to marriage (as we know it), a patriarchal institution for the subordination of women. It also implies an end of 'family' - as we know it. We should begin thinking of alternative models, instead of clinging on desperately to the old, obsolete one: begin thinking, perhaps, less in terms of 'family' and more in terms of 'community', the coming together of people of goodwill: a group of people living in close proximity, who love each other (whether sexually or not, it shouldn't be important), trust each other, and would like to raise children, in conditions of freedom, independence, and self-definition, growing up among reliable and responsible adults (not necessarily their biological parents - a great many children would choose not to, including myself if I had ever *had* a

choice), but relating primarily to their peers. What children need, and (within the patriarchal nuclear family) almost never get, is above all *respect*: to be listened to, to be allowed a voice, to be treated as intelligent beings with their own needs often quite outside the interests and demands of their biological parents. Obviously 'love' is also very important, but what is 'love' without respect? Isn't it inevitably contaminated by possessiveness, by the desire to reproduce oneself in one's child, to perpetuate the same values, the same conditioning: the pride of ownership: *my house, my car, my wife, my children...?* It is time we stopped talking about 'my' children, and began instead to listen to them.

All of this, in its turn, would involve the restructuring of our *physical* environment: the design of our houses, our high rises, etc., would all have to be rethought. And at the base of this is, inescapably, capitalism. But that seems to be already entering the stage of ultimate disintegration that Marx prophesied. Again, shouldn't we be trying to think, or dream, of possible alternatives?

I shall be told (nor for the first time) that I am being 'utopian', which is usually a simple way of saying that there's no point in thinking about it. But I believe in the absolute necessity of utopianism. The human race may never reach my, or anyone else's, utopia. But wouldn't even one small step toward it be worth taking? And if we don't have a utopian vision in our minds, how shall we take even that small step?

c. The Role of Gay Liberation.

It seems to me that gay people, male and female, are in a uniquely privileged position to take, not just one step, but many: they are not encumbered with all the heterosexual baggage of traditional marriage-and-family. For me it is a duty that we owe the civilization that, if it has persecuted us, has also somehow had the wisdom to produce us as its potential vanguard. Let's face it, heterosexual culture is today (to borrow a title from Gregg Araki) totally f***ed up. Shouldn't heterosexuals be looking to us for leadership? I think they should, and I think we should accept the responsibility this lays upon us: the task of helping to transform the entire culture. At present, unfortunately, most gays are as totally f***ed up as most heterosexuals: so many seem to have taken over unquestioningly the whole heterosexualist burden of romantic love, marriage-with-'cheating', possessiveness, guilt, etc... Traditionally, heterosexuals form (a) the couple in order to produce (b) the family. It seems irrational that gay men would compulsively gravitate to (a) when they have not the slightest intention of realizing its motivation (b). But then, I have done it myself.

Those who are opposed to these ideas - probably many, and not only heterosexual - should not, however, dismiss them because I have failed to live by them myself. I have, I think, with the (sometimes willing, sometimes reluctant) cooperation of others, pushed them about as far as they can be pushed *within the culture as it exists*. They could only be fully realized within a changed culture (and

they would of course be part of the change): a culture that accepted, without prejudice, every form of sexual expression that does not physically harm, exploit, subordinate or objectify others. I think we may be heading toward such a culture with (to me) unexpected rapidity, and for the starting-point of this process we have to look back more than a hundred years.

Tolstoy's Asterisks.

At a certain point in *Anna Karenina* (arguably the greatest novel ever written and by today's standards ideologically quite monstrous - 'political correctness' will doubtless demand its suppression quite soon), Tolstoy either cannot bring himself to describe something of crucial importance to the book, or was restricted from doing so by some form of censorship; so he 'expresses' the inexpressible with a row of asterisks. It is the moment where Anna and Dolly discuss their lives, and Anna explains to her friend (and sister-in-law) that there are ways of preventing conception. That row of asterisks has long seemed to me a historic, defining moment in the history of our civilization.

The point is, of course, that the acceptance of birth control, by which Tolstoy was so appalled that he couldn't write the words, lays everything open (the Pope, from his viewpoint, is absolutely right to continue to forbid it). It represents the acknowledgement of something the human race has always known but didn't like to say: that sex is not necessarily for procreation, but also for pleasure and human communication. From that row of asterisks the whole history of sexuality in the twentieth century might be said to grow. If sex is for pleasure and communication, and if this is accepted as a fact by society, with procreation reduced to the level of choice, then there is no reason whatever why this major form of expression and interchange should be the exclusive preserve of legally married heterosexual couples: premarital sex, extramarital sex, group sex, gay and lesbian sex - and even, why not?, incest if it's mutually desired - all become potentially available; the argument against them collapsing in ruins. The problems lie in the conditions of the culture rather than in sexuality itself: under patriarchy, heterosexual 'promiscuity' is likely to be at the expense of women, and incest will almost inevitably be oppressive and exploitative within the hierarchy-and-power structures of the nuclear family. But ultimately the acceptance of birth control makes the utopia I have tried to sketch at least *imaginable*.

Gays and Feminism.

A recent poll of gay men in one of Toronto's gay papers revealed that a majority do not support feminism. This tells us something about the present state of gay culture (its confusion and ignorance, for starters); it also brings us down with a bump from the euphoria of Gay Pride Day. How can these people, who should understand what patriarchal oppression is all about if anyone does, remain so reactionary, so socially and politically

unaware, so downright *stupid*? Are they too busy 'scoring' with their latest 'tricks' and practising their Judy Garland imitations? These are, no doubt, in many cases, the men with whom I have shared sexual epiphanies: men with whom I could not endure even five minutes of conversation.

I shall repeat what I have already said elsewhere: feminism alone can't save the world, but the world can't be saved without feminism. It is the key to our human future, heralding (as it grows within our own culture and spreads through others) the overthrow of patriarchy and 'masculinist' oppression, aggression and imperialism all over the world. (If you want to remind yourself how far it still has to go, just open your daily newspaper at any page). The justness, logic and truth of feminism are self-evident to anyone who is prepared to listen; its obstruction is due, not to any internal weaknesses in its arguments, but to ignorance and unawareness, and the patriarchal resistance and conditioning that perpetuates them.

I recently received a letter from an old friend who also happens to be a distinguished psychiatrist, in response to the article on *Persona* published in the last issue. I quote from it here without permission; the motivation is not personal antagonism but the feeling that this is representative of a certain Freudian psychiatric tradition:

'As a male of the common heterosexual type I find that you much too easily accept even the most dubious suggestions from the feminist camp, and without using the possibilities of a critical review. It is as if you had to deny your masculinity, and make excuses for it. But even if the male sex produced its Hitlers, Stalins, Neros, etc., it also produced its Mozarts, Beethovens, Stravinskys, Rembrandts... I do not think you can argue well if you have to deny an important part of your personality, the male one. And specifically it is difficult to convince the common male if his point of view is extinguished.'

I vividly recall F.R. Leavis, in certain of his lectures, reading out a passage from someone, raising his hands in a gesture of despair, and muttering, 'Well, what can one say...'

Well... The above quotation strikes me as an eloquent testimony to the ignorance and confusion of men (both gay and heterosexual) who reject feminism. There is, first, the confusion of the terms 'male' and 'masculine', here used as if they were interchangeable: I take the former to refer to biology and anatomy, the latter to the complex of factors that are socially constructed in the male under patriarchy upon this base, for its protection and continuance. The construction is achieved through what Freud called the 'Oedipus complex' (I prefer 'Oedipal trajectory'), which so many psychiatrists find it convenient to regard as universal and ineradicable (otherwise they would be out of work), rather than as the consequence of certain forms of social/familial organization. The fundamental drive of 'masculinity' (which characterizes not only male individuals but our male-dominated and male-defined

institutions) is the drive to dominate; it operates on every level, from the husband's desire to dominate his wife and the father's to dominate his family, through our civilization's business, legal, religious and educational structures, up to the nationalist/imperialist drive to dominate other cultures, other races, other religions. At the apex of 'masculinity' are phenomena such as the imagining, construction and use of nuclear and other weapons, and the principle of 'ethnic cleansing', also known as genocide. Why a psychiatrist (supposedly committed to notions of mental health) should regard my desire to deny my 'masculinity' as some kind of terrible psychic error is quite beyond me.

There are of course qualities commonly associated with 'masculinity' that must be viewed positively: activeness freed from aggression, the ability to control (situations, but especially oneself) without wanting to dominate, and above all creativity, which our culture has long considered the prerogative of men (a woman's creativity being reduced to the function of birthing and rearing children). There is absolutely no reason why these positive qualities should not be equally shared by women: indeed, it is highly desirable, both for women and for men, that they *should* be. Conversely, it is important that men should open themselves to the traditional 'feminine' qualities - sensitivity, tenderness, gentleness, grace, the capacity for nurturing - which would hold 'masculinity' in check, preventing its development into the drives that threaten to destroy our world. The healthy human being, whether 'male' or 'female', is both 'masculine' and 'feminine'.

For both its own sake and the world's, the gay movement *must* align itself with the other existing progressive or radical movements: with feminism, anti-racism, environmentalism, and ultimately with socialism in its more generous and humane forms. In short, a commitment to gay liberation should imply a much wider and more comprehensive commitment to the overthrow of *all* forms of oppression.

Is There Really Any Hope?

This summer I taught a course on the Hollywood cinema, and found it a remarkable and exhilarating experience. There were almost ninety students; the general level of work seemed to me astonishingly high; several of the students have been invited to write for *CineAction*, and one of them is represented in this issue. But what seemed to me so remarkable - and left me, at the end, with a feeling of such euphoria - was the apparently pervasive progressiveness of attitude (if there were dissenters they remained silent, despite repeated invitations to express their disagreements, whether with me or with the more vocal students). I found it a most moving, and enormously encouraging, experience (it was also barely tainted by the more rigid and repressive forms of 'political correctness'). I'm told (by certain students) that I should take some of the credit for this, but there is clearly more, far more to it than the possibly contagious enthusiasm of a teacher for his subject-matter (I rarely show films that I

don't love). The students were confronted with a series of masterpieces (*Make Way for Tomorrow*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, *The Reckless Moment*, *Mandingo*, *Heaven's Gate*, *Do the Right Thing*), chosen for both their quality and their potential subversiveness, and their response was overall extremely sensitive and understanding: unusually, many of them were immediately aware, with minimal prompting, of the complexity of the issues the films raised, and often they were leaping ahead of me. I usually regard large introductory courses as 'lecture courses' (there is nearly always one loudmouth who knows nothing but feels that he - it is *always* a he - has to speak), but here, as the course progressed, I increasingly took a back seat and let the students thrash things out. But I couldn't resist telling them, at the climax of one particularly rewarding session, 'Don't ever let anyone try to tell you that the classical Hollywood cinema was uniformly conservative and reactionary, and did nothing but reinforce and reproduce the dominant ideology'. The advice was well received. I also like to believe that my own modest contribution had a certain liberating effect: I told them at the outset to ignore (for this course) all that they'd been taught about the production of 'academic' papers (Don't talk personally, never use the first person singular, never use colloquialisms or obscenities, construct your essay according to certain fixed principles', etc., etc... All that shit). Cory Silverberg's article in this issue (basically his *exam* paper, for God's sake!) can stand as a fair example of the results.

This class (the best *large* class I've ever had) was of course atypical. But it cannot be *entirely* atypical. It gave me the sense that quite wonderful things are transpiring...germinating...within the present generation (and not only that: this was a 'night' course, and I calculated the age range as everything from eighteen to eighty). It amply confirmed my belief that older people should listen with respect to the young, instead of demanding that young people listen to *them*. Older people (and especially tenured and authoritarian academics obsessed with sustaining their own misplaced sense of self-importance) might learn a great deal. Isn't it time that 'teachers' began to open themselves to their students and become also 'learners'?

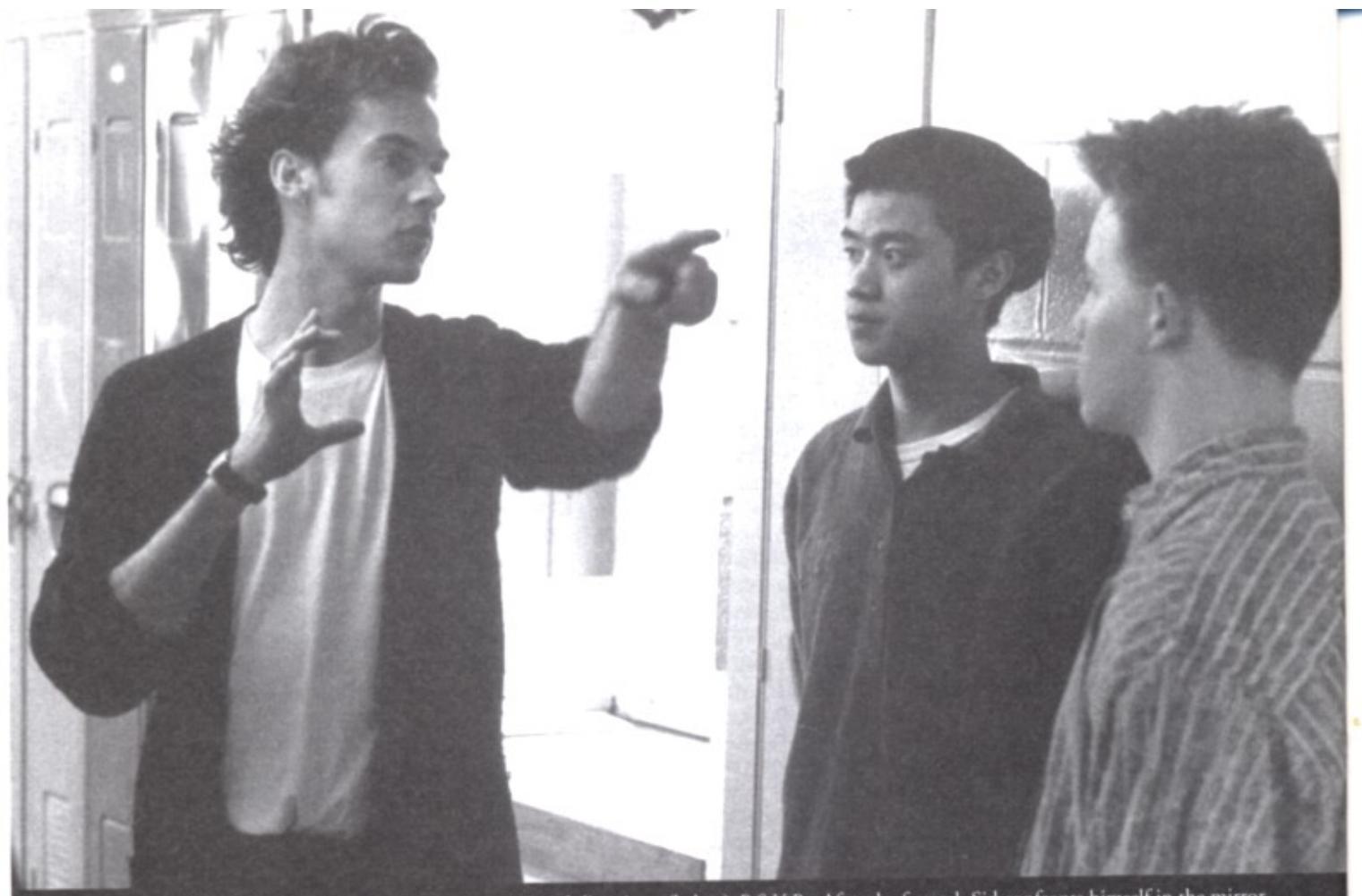
The class, highly diverse in age, race, colour, gender, sexual orientation, seemed (both in class discussion and written papers) solidly united in their rejection of racism and homophobia and generally sympathetic to feminism (some of the men were much better feminists than some of the women). The experience of working with them brought home to me the importance - and, today, at university level, the pervasive influence - of a non-repressive, flexible and non-judgemental 'political correctness'. I dedicate this article to them, with gratitude - though they must not, of course, be held responsible for its ideas and attitudes. I certainly would not have written it as I have without the support and confidence they gave me.

And so, at last, the films.

In fact, my initial project was not at all this sprawling manifesto but the much more modest one of examining a handful of recent independent 'gay' movies; it was to be centred (before I had seen it!) on John Greyson's *Zero Patience*. I knew, and very much like, Greyson's earlier half-hour film *The Making of Monsters* and, like many others, I anticipated that *Zero Patience* would be a major breakthrough. This project has not survived two viewings of the film: indeed, for a time, provoked by all the hype that surrounded its release in Toronto, I meditated transforming the article into a detailed attack on it. This now seems unnecessary and somewhat petty, the wild and entirely un- (or anti-) critical enthusiasm initially generated seeming restricted not merely to Canada but to this city. Two reviews are worth mentioning: that by Craig MacInnis in the *Toronto Star* ('five stars', the highest rating, otherwise reserved for undoubted masterpieces like *Wayne's World II*), and that by Kass Banning in *CineAction* 32. The interesting thing is that, while one would expect these to be at opposite ends of the spectrum, they are remarkably similar, almost to the point of being interchangeable. I am not of course suggesting any direct influence either way, the resemblance being attributable (at the most generous estimate) to a sincere desire to promote a new gay Canadian film which certainly isn't lacking in audacity. ('Promote' is the word: neither review has anything remotely to do with 'the common pursuit of true judgement'). A less generous (but I'm afraid more accurate) estimate is that the reviews were essentially *self*-promotional, motivated by a desire to show the readers how completely one is 'with it', 'in the know', 'in the forefront'. Beyond Toronto the film's reception has been far more mixed, and outside Canada generally lukewarm. None of my gay friends likes it, and (as far as I know) none of my heterosexual friends went to see it. The audience at the public screening I attended seemed to consist almost entirely of gay men, and it was clear both throughout and at the end (as everyone shuffled out of the auditorium in bemused silence) that they were not exhilarated.

John Greyson is a nice guy motivated by the very best intentions, but *Zero Patience* seems to me misguided on the levels both of conception and execution. The latter is the easier to deal with. If your ambition is to make 'the first AIDS musical' it is absolutely necessary to be right on top of *mise-en-scène*, and here, quite simply, nothing is good enough: the acting isn't good enough, the singing isn't good enough, the music isn't good enough, the dancing isn't good enough, the choreography isn't good enough, the 'special effects' aren't good enough. One might debate which is the film's most embarrassing sequence. For me, it's the viruses-in-the-bloodstream (women arguing while they float about in a sea of plastic bubbles), but it's rivalled by the scene where the stuffed animals come to life, and by the notorious 'butthole duet' (aversion therapy for assholes?).

It *may* be possible, with one's friends and lovers dying around one, both to make and to sit through a suc-



(above) *R.S.V.P.*: the school scene, Laurie Lynd directing. (below) *R.S.V.P.* : After the funeral, Sid confronts himself in the mirror.



cessful musical comedy about AIDS, but *Zero Patience* makes me wonder. Interestingly, the positive reviews have linked the film to 'camp' (apparently automatically and unquestioningly a 'good thing') and, for me, whatever its intentions, the effect is to trivialize and even desensitize. I don't think the best way to deal with pain and anger is to try to give people a good laugh (even if you succeed). I suppose I subjected the film to the most stringent test imaginable: when I saw it at the public screening, one of the most important people in my life (Andrew Britton) was in the final stage of AIDS (I assume that many members of the audience were in similar situations to mine). The film did almost nothing to help me focus my anger and my grief: I merely found most of it distasteful and insensitive. The only scenes I can salvage (aside from the last few minutes, which achieve - briefly and too late - an authentic and liberating intensity) are those concerning the decline and death of the former lover of 'Patient Zero': the actor is good, and they are for once firmly realized. Perhaps more significantly, they are the scenes where the film's determined stylization, and what I think of as the 'bright ideas' syndrome, are virtually abandoned. But, if we're to talk about the possibility of an 'AIDS musical', I would unhesitatingly give the whole of *Zero Patience* for the Maria Callas sequence in *Philadelphia*.

I don't like saying these things about a young and ambitious gay filmmaker of undoubted talent and potential: hopefully, *Zero Patience* is an aberration, the misjudgment of an overreacher. It's a relief to turn back to *The Making of Monsters*, a film that seems to me to have every advantage over its successor. One obvious advantage was unfortunately also its nemesis: Greyson used songs by Kurt Weill without clearing the rights, and Weill's estate has (with an astonishing lack of generosity) blocked any further public screenings until the music falls into public domain (in the year 2000): its intrinsic quality, and the emotional resonance it has accumulated over the years, add a whole dimension to the film that *Zero Patience* lacks.

More importantly, *Monsters* is content to remain (though it is certainly not unambitious!) a concise, tight, clearly focused film whose material and thematic are not 'stretched' to feature-length running time (in my experience, *Zero Patience* feels about half-an-hour longer than it actually is). If anything, the film is *too* packed, too dense. The abrupt, sometimes jarring, shifts of tone and manner, however, work very well within the context of its Brechtian (or pseudo-Brechtian) aesthetic, of which more later.

The film really has two titles: *The Making of Monsters* and *The Making of 'Monsters'*. It is simultaneously about the construction of homophobia (and 'masculinity') within the culture, and the construction of a film *about* that; it is also (if you still follow me) about the construction of a film *about* the construction of the film... The film we actually see purports to be a 'documentary', directed by 'Lotte Lenya' about the making of a film 'pro-

duced' by 'Georg Lukacs' and 'directed' by 'Berthold Brecht'. The form (which owes more to Godard than Brecht) can however be best described as a *collage*: different elements, strongly contrasted and highly stylized, but representing various levels of 'reality' or 'fantasy', are juxtaposed, and the viewer is left to make her/his sense of the total structure. The components include: Brief film clips from Pabst's version of *The Threepenny Opera* and of a theatrical production of Brecht's *Edward II*; scenes of 'Brecht' and 'Lukacs' at work on the film, ostensibly part of Lotte Lenya's documentary; scenes she could not possibly have shot (Brecht and Lukacs arguing in a restaurant, a scene in a park at night where two of the cast members debate and begin to participate in park sex, to the tune of 'Surabaya Johnny'); what looks like 'found' footage of red-neck beer halls (but was probably shot for the film); a dance number (staged and performed with great snap) connecting masculinity, hockey and violence; a final climactic song, 'Bash back, baby', the performance of which is intercut with footage of a gay protest march. The (very loosely) connecting thread through all this is the factual story of a gay schoolteacher who was murdered in a park by five teenage boys, which gives us the film's two most overtly emotional segments: the murdered man's lover talking about him directly to the audience while he drives nails into a coffin; the victim's mother talking about her son as she washes dishes, telling us that if *she* had sex in a field with a man it would be perceived as glorious and romantic, but when her son did the gay equivalent he was murdered for it. The second of these speakers (but not the first) is identified as an actor, interrupted by Brecht's complaint that the scene is too emotional. One might reasonably argue that this intricate structure and anti-realist aesthetic end up (like certain Godard films from *Mao in USA* to *Wind from the East*) producing more confusion than Brechtian clarity, but they are also the source of the film's continuing fascination and distinction (I have seen it at least six times and am not at all tired of it).

It is not, however, without its problems. It seems abundantly clear that Greyson sides with Brecht against Lukacs, but it is Brecht filtered through Godard, a 'false' Brechtianism that seems to derive from too literal a reading of Brecht's theory and too little attention to his practice. Brecht's plays (at least those with which I am familiar) never *cleanly* dissociate themselves from the basics of 'Realist' theatre: they retain strong narrative lines, with identifiable and evolving characters, and they don't wholly preclude a certain degree of identification. The principle of 'alienation', or, as I prefer, *distanciation* ('making the familiar strange') operates to counter this without obliterating it (to do so altogether seems virtually impossible within a narrative work): the plays operate on a fine balance between sympathetic involvement and analytical (or critical) distance. For me, although they lack the more obvious accoutrements of Brechtian *distanciation*, remaining within a 'realist' framework that would not displease Lukacs, the best Hollywood films of Lang (*Scarlet Street*),

Sternberg (*The Scarlet Empress*), or Ophuls (*The Reckless Moment*), are closer to the spirit of Brechtian practice than the collages of Greyson and Godard, where the narrative line is all but annihilated. One might argue also that on some level Greyson actually resents Brecht (because he wasn't radical enough?) even while he appears committed to him: why else make him grotesque and ridiculous by having him played by a talking catfish (a decision for which I can find no other explanation)?

What I regard as the pseudo-Brechtianism works well enough, on the whole, within the modest length of *Monsters*. When one passes from it to *Zero Patience* one senses another, perhaps quite unconscious, motivation: not so much to distance the audience from too strong an emotional engagement, but a fear of emotion itself (not hard to understand in our current situation, but not conducive to artistic achievement). The scene in *Monsters* of the lover driving the nails into the coffin has a powerful emotional directness countered by the obvious stylization (no one could possibly mistake it for a 'realistic' representation). I can find little equivalent for this in *Zero Patience*. My touchstone for the 'ideal' Brechtian work (whether its authors saw it this way or not - if they did they never let on) is the Stravinsky/Cocteau *Oedipus Rex*. The elaborate distancing devices (a Latin text, a narrator in evening dress repeatedly interrupting the action, the abrupt stylistic shifts in the music, within an overall unity - every character, even the most minor such as the Shepherd, is defined by the adoption of a different style referring to a vast range of musical history, from Handel to Verdi via traditional Russian choral writing) partly counter what nonetheless remains one of music's most powerful emotional experiences: powerful, paradoxically, because of the distancing, because one is not simply sucked in but can become analytically aware of the emotions even while experiencing them. Perhaps one of the supreme masterpieces of twentieth century art is an unfair comparison, but it helps to point up the limitations within which Greyson is currently working.

Laurie Lynd also makes musicals about gay issues. Of his three short films so far (I gather we can expect a first feature in the not-so-distant future), the first, *Together and Apart*, is somewhat awkward but immediately arresting: emotionally complex and subtle, with the musical 'interruptions' used as distancing devices. The third, *The Fairy Who Didn't Want to be a Fairy Anymore*, is a pleasing, fully assured, well executed *jeu d'esprit* which, from my viewpoint, hovers perilously on the verge of 'camp'.

The film I want to talk about and celebrate is the middle one, *R.S.V.P.*, a small masterpiece, fully controlled and perfectly realized: every shot seems thought, and thought in relation to a total structure. I had better say that at this time it is probably impossible for me to look at the film objectively (but is even the most rigorously 'scientific' critic really objective?). I saw it around the same time, and under roughly the same circumstances, as the public screening of *Zero Patience*. It opens with a man,

Sid, returning home from the funeral of his lover, who has died of AIDS; a few minutes into the film he has switched on a request programme on the radio. His lover, before he died, had written in to request Jessye Norman singing 'Le Spectre de la Rose' from Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'Été* (The song continues or is repeated through most of the film, and Norman was apparently more generous and enlightened than the Weill Foundation). The lover's name was Andrew; the piece was also a favourite of Andrew Britton's, who had just died. I cried throughout the film's half-hour, and repeated viewings have not inoculated me: tears spring to my eyes every time I think of it (like at this moment...). Yet I am convinced that this is not just a matter of coincidence: the film's quality seems to me self-evident, and analyzable in its precision. It was the first time I had been able to cry, the film enabling me to experience and confront the grief that had until then been frozen inside me. I know of no other film that communicates more movingly the sense of irrecoverable loss.

Widely disparate in tone, method and address, *R.S.V.P.*, *Zero Patience* and *Philadelphia* strikingly share certain concerns, the basic thematic nucleus of much of today's gay-centred cinema, ranging across the entire spectrum from 'commercial' to 'avant-garde': 1. The horror of AIDS, most obviously, but also the horror of premature death (the men who die or have died in all three films are young). 2. The desire to attract public attention to this contemporary catastrophe: *R.S.V.P.* contains a scene in a bookstore (the Berlioz song playing here also) where one of the assistants is pinning a photograph of Andrew to a large bulletin board covered with pictures of AIDS victims. 3. Homophobia: the scene in the school in which Andrew taught, where a young female colleague finds the word 'Faggot' scrawled over the announcement of his death, two students grinning in uneasy defiance, a third looking ashamed. Hence: 4. *R.S.V.P.* shares with both *Zero Patience* and *Monsters* a concern with the role of education: in *Zero* the ex-lover is a schoolteacher, and the classroom scenes are among the best things in the film. 5. *R.S.V.P.* and *Philadelphia* also share a concern absent from *Zero* (though present in *Monsters*): the victim's family and their attitude (acceptance/rejection) to having a gay son. *Philadelphia* has been much attacked for presenting an 'unrealistic' family who totally accept and support a gay son with AIDS. It's curious that, after all the 'deconstructive' work done on Realism in recent years, critics remain far more concerned with what is or is not 'realistic' than do most Hollywood filmmakers. The family of *Philadelphia* may be atypical but it's certainly not impossible; it is clear that Demme and Nylander's project here was precisely to educate, by showing how a family, ideally, should behave. In *R.S.V.P.* Sid eventually phones Andrew's sister alerting her to the playing of the Berlioz song, and she in turn phones their mother. The implication is not that the parents had rejected Andrew exactly, but that their acceptance of the relationship had been qualified and reluctant. The film then (almost) ends with



the father leaving a message on Sid's answering machine thanking him for telling them about the radio programme, and being able (we assume for the first time) to acknowledge Sid's importance in Andrew's life. The song acts as the film's signifier of the possibility of community, drawing not just family members but also outsiders together across time and space.

All three films might be loosely described as 'didactic', but with vast differences. *Zero Patience* forces its didacticism explicitly on the audience in a way that comes to feel like nagging, an effect not mitigated by placing it within musical numbers; one might also question whether the audience the film addresses *needs* this, as the film has clearly not succeeded (nor could it) in reaching out into the mainstream. The didacticism of *Philadelphia* is very clear, and not the less so for being contained within a 'realist' narrative; that of *R.S.V.P.* is the subtlest, more a matter of delicate suggestion than preaching. Yet I don't believe this makes it ineffective. Lynd's film achieves a perfect formal balance between identification and distance: we are moved but we are also led to *think*.

I had intended to discuss Gregg Araki's 'Irresponsible Movie' *The Living End* in some detail, but I have gladly surrendered this to my student (and teacher) Cory Silverberg. I shall content myself with just a few isolated points.

1. The only member of my class who declared the film to be 'offensive' was also the only one who is openly gay (he subsequently retracted his protest when he saw it again on video). One other member, a kindly liberal, raised the objection that the film is *politically* irresponsible - that it gives heterosexual audiences a 'bad impression' of gay men (the kind of argument gay activists levelled against *Cruising*). Many of the students chose (from a fairly wide range of options) to write on it in their exam, on the whole with great enthusiasm.

2. There are different kinds of 'irresponsibility'. I love the film as a whole, but I *hate* the early scene (it seems entirely gratuitous) with the two crazy murderous lesbians. I don't think Araki effectively atones for this sin with the lesbian couple in *Totally F***ed Up* (which I also love): they are presented sympathetically enough, but they are not only marginalized but minimalized, their presence looking very much like tokenism.

3. Thematically, and in its method and impact, *The Living End* stands far apart from the other films I have discussed. For one thing (despite its Godardisms, which derive from the early films, not the later ones) it is not in the least didactic: it wishes not to educate people but to exercise the artist's prerogative of honesty and self-expression. (This is not to say that one cannot *learn* from it - one can learn from any work of art, and the more honest it is the more there will be to learn). It makes no apologies for its characters or for their behaviour, and neither glorifies nor vilifies them. Its terrific impact derives from its rage and desperation, and it makes not the slightest effort to be 'safe' or 'lovable'. It is also proud, rather than ashamed, of its derivation from the Hollywood genres (qualified by the Godard influence); and it is also the film that has reached the widest audience, and the only one so far released on video.

4. Its greatest strength, perhaps, is in the passion of its love/sex scenes (love and sex being here inseparable). The response to it of my heterosexual students suggests that people are far more likely to accept (and enjoy) a frank and unashamed treatment of gay sex than a 'decently reticent' or 'tasteful' one.

Instead of ending this article with some kind of summing up, I here beat a swift retreat and pass things over to Gregg Araki and Cory Silverberg...

I wish to thank, once again, the Ontario Arts Council for their generous support.

Totally F***ed Up, *but 'Things are slowly getting better':*

Bringing Up Baby: Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn



an interview with Gregg Araki.

This interview was conducted by Richard Lippe and Robin Wood at last year's Toronto Film Festival; we thank the Festival administration for their help in arranging it. Gregg was friendly, frank and open, and we established an instant rapport.

RW: ...Gregg Araki is going to take over...

GA: I'm going to speak. *The Living End* has the subtitle 'An Irresponsible Movie', and the 'Irresponsible' relates to a number of different things. One of them is in fact 'The Lure of Irresponsibility'.

RW: From my book on Howard Hawks???

GA: Yeah. Well, *Bringing Up Baby* is one of my all-time favourite movies. Screwball comedy was certainly my niche in film school. I wrote a lot of papers on it, and *Bringing Up Baby* is the most brilliant American film ever, and I think there's a clear structural relationship between it and *The Living End* in terms of the whole notion of repression and nature and the 'free spirit' character liberating the more repressed character. That's what you were talking about in 'The Lure of Irresponsibility' - the relationship in that film between irresponsibility represented by the Katharine Hepburn character and Cary Grant and his rigid moral order...

RW: I would write that chapter very differently now. And you might like it much better.

GA: Well, you'd have to incorporate *The Living End* now, so... Some people get that, the *Bringing Up Baby* thing, if they're film school persons. It goes around, comes around. I can't wait to tell my professors I've been interviewed by Robin Wood.

RL: I'm struck by the romanticism of *The Living End*. It reminded me of something like *Rebel Without a Cause*. Obviously there are many differences, but there's an element of that intensity of youth, very idealistic on one hand but with a kind of knowingness. There's a connection here, if we take Godard as a starting-point and go back to Nicholas Ray - a very intense romanticism coming out of both of your films that we've seen.

GA: I certainly see that. Unlike some of my peers I went to film school for a long time, and I have a background in critical and analytical studies, I've done a lot of critical work, and there's all that in my movies. Clearly *Totally F***ed Up* is my most Godardian - *Masculine-Feminine* - as Godard set out in that movie to make a film about youth, structured in a youthful way. That was the starting-point for this film, but clearly there are elements of a lot of various directors and films and tendencies that have influenced me. Screwball comedies and also outlaw-on-the-run movies were two of my favourite genres because they deal with this purity, this spiritual romanticism that is personally something I'm very into. Godard likewise is very romantic, especially *Breathless* where he's dealing with this...pure...relationship in this impure world. So in general I can look at the films that have influenced me, and tie them to my own movies.

RW: But in Godard - both in *Breathless* and *Masculin-Féminin* - the romanticism is entirely on the man's side. These are both extremely misogynist movies, especially *Masculin-Féminin* where *all* the women are so stupid...

GA: (interrupting): I don't know, I have a problem with that... I have a problem with the feminist talk on Godard because I don't think he's... I mean, I think one way I have an advantage over Godard is that I'm gay...

RW: ...Yes, I think that's a great advantage...

GA: I think that Godard, by his very nature... I mean, he was married to Anna Karina and stuff... His camera is a very objectifying camera. But I think he deals with that in a very self-conscious way, and comments on that, for example in *Vivre Sa Vie* where he deals so much with the fragmentation of the body and the *imagery* of women. I always give him the benefit of the doubt. In person, I think he is a bit of a misogynist, he always has this 20-year-old plaything with him wherever he goes. But everything he deals with seems to be not on the surface, there's always something going on. For instance in *Breathless* people talked about the Belmondo character and how sexist he is, and I think there's a real difference between the authorial point of view and the character's. I feel at an advantage because, being gay, my camera's much more objectifying towards the male than towards the female, and so it frees me up from a lot of baggage I think.



Masculin-Féminin

RL: The stuff with Jean Seberg in *Breathless* is - given that it was made in 1960 before feminism came along again...at least it's very contradictory how she's positioned in the film and what her aims are and what that means to a woman in 1960, and there's at least enough contradiction there to make it something more complicated than just misogyny.

GA: Another favourite of mine is Keaton, and certain feminists attack *him*, and I give both of them more credit than that. I think there's a whole lot of subtleties going on in terms of how the imagery is being used, as opposed to some Bruce Willis movie where it's just a tits-and-ass statement.

RW: You do somewhat marginalize the two women in ... (hesitation)

GA: In *Totally asterisk, asterisk, asterisk...*

RW: Yes, is that your title? Or was it...

GA: That *is* the title. It's the title on the script. It's not the Toronto Film Festival or... Yes, someone asked me about that at the screening. I didn't want to downplay the women. My producer is a woman, and I very much relate to lesbians, and I respect them very much. Their place in society is in some ways much better than the place of most heterosexuals and of gay men, because they've achieved an autonomy, I think, outside of the patriarchal structure that everyone else is locked into. But because the film to me comes from a very personal place, the stories of the four boys are much more foregrounded. And the fact that *I* am not a lesbian... The characters of the four boys evolved outwards... It *is* a problem in the film that the women are essentially playing nurturing roles. In a way I think that's indicative of what has happened in the gay community in terms of AIDS. The gay males seem to be much more under siege, and lesbians are much more figures of strength.

RW: I also think artists (and critics for that matter) should deal with things they're comfortable with and know about, and not try to be politically correct and make statements about things they aren't really intimate with. So I sympathize with you there.

GA: My films are not 'politically correct'. It's not something I think about when I'm doing them. Especially with *Totally F***ed Up*, the film is not all things to all people and that's the philosophy of the film, to be as specific as possible.

RW: No artist can afford to be 'politically correct'. It's a straitjacket. You have to keep telling yourself, 'I mustn't say this, I mustn't do this...' And then the whole function of art is lost, which is simply to reveal things

whether they're right or wrong, just show them to the public...

GA: I don't censor myself in that way. (Communal laughter).

RL: I want to ask you something about your camera and the sense of objectivity and the male body. I like *Totally F***ed Up*. I found that the love scenes between Andy and Ian, and generally the love scenes between the men, had a nice sensual edge to them. Yet you don't show anything very explicit about sexual encounters. Was there any particular reason for that - that the actors didn't want to do it, or because you didn't want to bring a quasi-pornographic element into the film, or did you want to keep the sensuality, not off-screen, but...

GA: In general I don't plan these things out, they just come to me in a very visual way. As I'm writing them I just *see* them, and that's always how I've seen the scenes to be filmed. To me it has a lot to do with a certain romanticism of the sexual encounters in the film, it's not essentially about physicality, it's the spiritual connection between two people. Especially in *The Living End*, but in this film too, there's continual use of very tight two-shots, close-ups. Because I think it's very interesting the way that people interact during sex - not so much the way the bodies are interacting so much as the way they're interacting as people, which is why a lot of the sex scenes are filmed the way they are.

RW: Which is usually ignored in most treatments of sex scenes. The people just writhe about in slow motion or...

GA: The last three Hollywood films I've seen all had the same sex scene, with these ridiculous montages with cheesy music and naked bodies writhing around. That's not how *I* had sex the last time I had sex. It's something that in my future work also...it's similar to mid-period Almodovar like *The Law of Desire* and *Matador*. These are really intense sexual encounters, but there's really no nudity, the films aren't dealing with the body so much as what's going on in these scenes, something that I found much more interesting.

RL: I liked that aspect, and I thought a couple of scenes, especially the one in the bathroom, the whole thing about getting an erection... that was very nicely handled, it's got a nice edge to it, a sense of intimacy is being suggested, something very nice happens between the actors.

RW: I wonder if you've seen *Zero Patience*.

GA: No, I haven't. Don't tell John I haven't seen it yet...



RW: Well, this won't appear until nine months from now... It's interesting because he is also very strongly influenced by Godard, yet there seems almost no connection between what he's doing and what you're doing. He's taken certain things from Godard and you've taken quite other things, and you've gone completely different ways.

GA: I know we come from very different backgrounds, just that he's from *here* and I'm from Los Angeles, another world. I think we have different interests. To me one of the things about the 'Queer New Wave' is that all the filmmakers are very individual, they all have very different concerns, very different politics - in general they're very different people. To lump me and John and Todd Haynes and Tom Kalin and everybody together... I see that there *are* similarities, but there are also similarities between my work and heterosexual independent films like Rick Linklater's movies, *Slacker* and so on. It's difficult for me to be categorized...

RW: Oh, I wasn't trying to categorize you, quite the opposite. By linking you both to Godard I was trying to say that you've taken off in completely different directions...

GA: From the same starting-point...

RW: Perhaps not even that: you start from two very different Godards. The heterogeneity is fine. You have to attack on every front...

GA: On *all* fronts...

RW: 'Change everything, now', as Jane Fonda says near the end of *Tout Va Bien*.

GA: Right now... Sometime in the near future.

RL: The title *Totally F***ed Up* - where did it come from? Were you thinking about the world in general...

GA: It came sort of out of the ether: the philosophy of my generation.

RW: I think it's my generation as well. I often feel that everything is 'totally fucked up'.

GA: The thing about the film for me is the ideas coming with these kids who have been...you know...*thrust* into this world. They've never known a world without AIDS, they didn't live through the '60s. I think to be a young person, to be 18, in 1993 is extremely scary. I hang out with a lot of young people, and there's a real sense of... Part of it is just ordinary teen alienation and *angst* but the other part is very real. We live in a society where the political system has collapsed and the economy's so bad, AIDS... There's just so much *sht* that these young people face, and they don't see the light at the end of the tunnel. There isn't this great sense of 'Everything's going to be all right', and that in a way is what the film's about.

RW: I can identify with that completely.

GA: Hopefully things will get better, but so far...

RL: I found this film more satisfying than *The*

Living End. I was very struck by how much the earlier film was a reworking of *Breathless*, with the two characters...

GA: And a reworking of *Bringing Up Baby*.

RL: It seemed more forced. The new film seemed more organic. It's partly the structure...

GA: To me they're really different films. *The Living End* is a much angrier film, it has a very *rude* tone to it, whereas this film - I wouldn't call it soft or sentimental but it's much more heartfelt. Also because they're kids...

RL: The characters are more vulnerable...

GA: It doesn't have that 'Fuck You!' sort of edge, that set some people off.

RW: The last line of the film we saw this morning, Margarethe von Trotta's *The Long Silence*... I can't quote it quite exactly, but it's something like 'Happiness can grow only out of desperation'. I like that.

GA: I think there's a certain truth in that.

RW: It seems to apply to your films as well.

GA: I think that's one of the touching things, there are these moments of euphoria and bliss.

RL: Both films have that energy and vitality that give the feeling of something direct and immediate you're trying to communicate.

GA: That's one of the things that appealed to me about the Godard films of the '60s - taking those Godard classes in school, and they were totally just like 'There'. And they still have this resonance thirty years later, but they totally captured that time. And that's how I felt about this film - though it was shot about two years ago and certain things have already become obsolete in the meantime.

RW: So what about your next three films?

GA: They're all in various stages, they're all percolating. I have two that are essentially scripted, both bigger. The one that's probably going to happen next is a little under a million dollars. Just as *The Living End* is subtitled 'An Irresponsible Movie', this one is subtitled 'A Heterosexual Movie', but it's heterosexual in a very queer way, which is something that is really interesting for me. I think that of the movies I've made it's the most subversive. At the same time it's another road movie about teenagers, it has this bisexual edge: two beautiful boys, and the girlfriend of one of the guys. Very violent and intense: I call

it '*Last Tango in Paris* for Teenagers'. What I would like to accomplish with it, if it works on the level I want, is that it will be on the film festival circuit, but at the same time I'd like it to appeal in a schizophrenic way to Friday night shopping mall teenagers because the concept of being able to do that really fascinates me.

RW: That partly answers my big question, which is What audiences do you want to reach? Who are your films for?

GA: I don't really think that much about audiences. But I know what my sensibility is and I hope audiences share that sensibility.

RW: So much gay cinema, gay fiction, seems so strictly directed towards gay audiences, and sets out to flatter them, cheer them up. That's fine in its way, it's important work. But it seems to me that gay people should be reaching out to the whole civilization. And I think you're doing that. The fact that *The Living End* got a fairly wide release...

GA: I don't feel limited in that way, the main reason being that there's a large faction of the gay community who don't like my films at all, in somewhat the same way they don't like Dennis Cooper's work: they don't want to see the darker side, the nihilism or whatever. And I think there are open-minded, alternative straight people who are much more accepting of my work, than very conservative gay people who want only the PC positive model, that sort of thing.

RL: It's valuable that your work addresses gay teenagers, and takes on that *Breakfast Club*, John Hughes vision, because gay films are usually about older men, or men isolated. The whole tone of the movie is different...

GA: More serious...

RL: High school students should be seeing this.

GA: Get it to the high schools!!! One of the things I appreciate about my own movies is that I'm very interested in representing the unrepresented. And I do think there hasn't been a representation of the type of gay teenagers in *Totally F***ed Up*. That whole subculture within the subculture is completely ignored. One of the hardest things about being young and gay is the feeling of isolation.

RL: I was thinking, while watching the movie, how much I would have loved watching it when I was a kid - to realize that there are people out there thinking and feeling these things, if you're living in some little town in the mid-West...



RW: If you think *this* is isolation try growing up in the '30s and '40s in a British middle-class environment. I didn't know there were other gay people in the world. I didn't have a word for what I was...

GA: You and Terence Davies...

RW: ...I just thought I must be completely insane.

GA: I think one of the few good things to come out of the AIDS crisis is the new queer visibility, like ACT UP and Queer Nation. For all their controversial tactics, just the fact that they're visible is so important, if you're living in the South, or in England, or not in West Hollywood, when you don't even see gay people, you don't know what gay people are like, outside of the lethal stereotypes. Just to see these young ACT UP guys on TV, to know these guys are gay - those things are really important. That's why things are changing, albeit slowly, and painfully.

RW: I think it's one of the few hopeful signs in the culture that the gay movement *is* making strides, despite all the obstacles and setbacks.

RL: What is your response to the whole question of gender and sexuality, that's become so high profile in the culture in the last years, with the drag issue and RuPaul, and been taken over to some extent by the mainstream? Do you find that anything that throws up issues and causes discussion and controversy is valuable, or do you see some of the stuff coming out as ultimately negative or...

GA: In general I think having anything brought out

into the open is much better, discussions are being provoked. For instance there was that big controversial thing in *Sassy* magazine, 'My brother's gay', directed towards those teenage girls. One of the benefits of making *Totally F***ed Up* was dealing with these 19-year-old kids for a summer, and realizing that a large part of the younger generation were very cool about things like sexuality. Things are slowly getting better. It very much surprised me, the willingness of these kids to do what I said, even though they weren't gay. They were into it and it wasn't a problem. This is not to say that homophobia's non-existent, but these kids *have* grown up with all this homophobic stuff going on, and I think sexuality with the next generation is a much less taboo thing, because gay people are so much more visible. The arbiters of homophobia are mostly old heterosexual men, and hopefully they'll all pass on.

RW: You told the audience after the screening of your film that only one of the six young actors is gay. We've been trying to guess which is the gay one and we can't, it's impossible.

GA: That's the way it's supposed to be.

RL: Do you plan to continue your regime of producing, writing, directing, editing, shooting...?

GA: The next one I probably won't edit, and probably won't shoot, although I can. A great advantage I have over almost every other filmmaker in the world is that I've done everything myself for so long. If my films get so *out there* that they cannot be financed, I know that no matter what I'll always be able to make a film.



Breathless: Jean Sebey, Jean-Paul Belmondo

Discuss
The Living End
as a response to
the AIDS crisis.
You have
three hours.

OR

Trying to
understand
Love and Hate
in an exam
situation.

by
Cory Silverberg

Writing an exam is a peculiar exercise. Despite what any well-intentioned professor might tell you, trying to assemble a series of coherent thoughts in an auditorium filled with other people with an overzealous proctor informing you of the time remaining every fifteen minutes is pretty much an intellectual free for all. The obvious problem with this situation is that for many people creativity and time limits are not particularly conducive. There are two great tricks to writing an exam. First, if you are not actually going to answer the question at least make it seem like you are. Second, ask a lot of questions in your writing. If you are lucky the reader of the exam will assume that you could answer these questions if you were given more time and a less threatening environment. The style of exam writing usually takes one of two forms. It is either fragmented and incomplete, or it follows a type of stream-of-consciousness format. In either case I think what best characterizes exam writing is that it is writing out of desperation; desperation to beat the clock, to beat the grade, or just to get out of the lecture hall in time to catch your bus.

The following paper was produced under circumstances similar to those described above. Some elements of the paper have been cleaned up but for the most part it is as it was. And if nothing else it certainly remains a piece of desperate writing.

ANSWER:

Discussing *The Living End* solely as a response to AIDS is like trying to talk about a politician as a human being; the context is too restrictive. As Araki makes clear in the interview by Richard Lippe and Robin Wood, published in this issue, *The Living End* is about much more than HIV or AIDS. The film is a working out, and working through, of a number of issues related to being young, gay, and American. It is about more than AIDS in the same way that a movie like *Coming Home* is about more than physical disability. Both these films deal with a disability, but wisely put the disability in its proper place, that is secondary to other concerns like character, action, emotion. As a result, it is practically impossible to discern what in the film is a direct comment about AIDS and what is a more general comment on the state of the world. Nonetheless, if we want to evaluate *The Living End* as a response to AIDS we can ask ourselves a few questions such as: Who is the audience for this film? What is being portrayed? And finally, what does the audience take away from the film? As we attempt to answer these questions it might be helpful to compare *The Living End* with a radically different response

to AIDS, *Philadelphia*. The most fundamental difference between these two movies in terms of their response to AIDS lies in the mode of activism they embrace. *Philadelphia* accomplishes something very few independent films ever do. It tries to encourage the participation and understanding of the majority in the lives of the minority. In the current social and political climate of North America, if you want to accomplish any substantial change you will either have to make the people in power understand you enough to realize it's in their best interest to change, or you can kill them. In making itself palatable to a mainstream audience *Philadelphia* takes one step toward accomplishing the former mode of activism. Clearly *The Living End* represents the latter form of activism.

The Living End's audience is, unfortunately, limited by a number of things. It had a minuscule budget, no "stars", no marketing, and a completely uncompromising creator. It is unlikely that any mainstream moviegoer is going to make the trek to a repertory theatre to see what they may have heard (if indeed they had heard anything at all) was a gay road movie. The very subtitle of the film - "An Irresponsible Movie" - may put off many potential viewers. Another way in which the film's audience is limited has to do with the intent of the filmmaker. The film does not set out to educate its audience. Nor does it talk down to, or preach to us. I think what Araki tries to do is give it to us as it is. In doing this Araki no doubt raised the ire of the both the establishment and the politically correct left. The film is supremely politically incorrect not only in terms of content but in the fact that Araki is clearly not out to please everyone (or perhaps even to please anyone). After all a conservative is a conservative, despite sexual orientation, and there are many people who would refuse to see a film that contains such ambiguous, potentially negative portrayals of gay characters. Araki's approach is precisely the opposite to the approach taken by traditional Hollywood films and by a film like *Philadelphia*. Practically by definition, a Hollywood film is designed to appeal to the broadest base ticket-buying public. *Philadelphia* had an Academy Award winning director, big "stars", a big budget, and an avalanche of advertising. In all of this and in the film itself, *Philadelphia* makes a concerted effort not to offend and not to alienate the mainstream moviegoer¹.

The next question worth consideration deals with what is being portrayed in *The Living End*. In his interview with Robin Wood and Richard Lippe, Araki mentions a few of the things the film represented for him. Top on the list seems to be the idea that the world is fast becoming, or has already become, a fairly desperate and bleak place. Araki is interested not only in chronicling this (the best example of this type of film being Richard Linklater's *Slacker*) but also in looking at characters, at people, and how they interact with each other in their own desperation. What Araki finds is that there does still exist some hope; that there are "these moments of euphoria and

bliss", but that all this exists in a world which inverts most of our traditional values. This inversion of values is apparent throughout the film. It is also brought out in the Lippe/Wood interview with Araki. In the interview Robin Wood paraphrases the last line of *The Long Silence*, "Happiness can grow only out of desperation" in reference to *The Living End*. I think however that *The Living End* is not about statements such as these. While it is true that the film does show love and happiness emerging out of desperation it is not necessarily because of the desperation. Rather, the world is simply desperate and if anything positive does emerge it will, by definition, be coming out of their desperation. Araki quite skilfully avoids the suggestion of any cause and effect relationship between the two. Indeed, by showing us such a convincingly desperate world (complete with live operations on television, and liquor stores with neon clown signs) Araki shows such statements to be completely obsolete.

There are two other key inversions that take place in the film worth mentioning. The first has to do with love, the second with anger and violence. Through Luke the film challenges practically every way that we normally define love. The typical notion of romantic love entails the feeling that you would give your life for your lover; that your lover is the most important object there is; that you care about your lover and your lover's life more than you do about your own. All of these traditional meanings become obsolete in *The Living End*. Life in this film is not a precious commodity (again, this is not exactly true but a complete examination of this will have to wait for a later time, remember, you only have three hours). This idea comes to a climax when Jon finally decides to leave Luke. Luke tells Jon in the same breath that he loves Jon more than life and that he does not care about anything anymore. If life is not particularly precious to Luke then what does this say about his love for Jon? If nothing really matters and if all the leads are going to die in the end anyway, how can we define or contextualize Luke's love within any of our existing frameworks? *The Living End* poses a series of deeply troubling questions to traditional values and definitions of love (indeed, one might take this film as a good explanation of the skyrocketing divorce rate in North America and the almost obsessive North American habit of trying to find the "perfect" love).

The second great inversion in the film revolves around anger and violence, or what Araki refers to as the film's "'fuck you' sort of edge". This comment of Araki's reminded me of a quote of Spike Lee's. He was talking about being in South Africa during the filming of *Malcolm*

¹ We should note the difficult position a completely politically correct moviegoer is in here. For it would be bad to see *The Living End* because of its possible negative impact on the gay community, but it is also wrong to see *Philadelphia* because surely there can be no redeeming value in any Hollywood movie. It seems to be that to be truly politically correct one will have to swear off movies altogether.

X, and he said that being there really made him want to pick up a gun and start shooting white people. This is the same kind of anger we see in *The Living End*. Luke's total lack of concern for the people he kills does not so much show him to be sociopathic, as it shows him to be desperate. When all else fails, violence generally is the last resort (unless you are a government, in which case it's the first). Luke simply has nothing else to do, and nothing to lose. There is certainly no good reason for him not to kill the people he does. After all, would they not kill him if they had the chance? This question is raised in the film directly after Luke beats the man over the head with his stereo. He challenges Jon (who thinks he is crazy for doing this) to admit that he did not want to see "that fucker's head cracked open". Jon has no answer and stands on propriety. It's wrong to kill. Again, the world of the film (which, I think it can be fairly argued, bears a striking resemblance to the world outside the film) inverts our traditional way of thinking about killing just as it does about love. For if we do not value life, why not kill? It would be wrong to suggest that there is no political motivation for Luke's violence (the politicization of Luke's anger reaches a beautiful climax when he suggests that instead of shooting Bush they inject him with a syringe of their blood and watch as a cure magically appears the following day). But I do not think that politics is the primary motivator for Luke. Rather it is the complete absence of motivation to do anything else, anything positive (which again comes from a belief in the futility of day to day action) that moves Luke to violence.

The world of *Philadelphia* does none of this for its audience. For where *The Living End* portrays the real struggle to live, *Philadelphia* provides its audience with the Great Struggle, American style. Here we encounter the standard dichotomy for an audience to absorb. There are good characters (Tom Hanks, his lover, his family and friends), bad characters (the law firm, the homophobic men in the bar) and the character in conflict (Denzel Washington). I do not want to suggest that *Philadelphia* suffers for this simplicity. Far from it. It is such a strong movie in part because it does not bite off more than it can chew. And despite its apparent maintenance of the status quo in its simplicity it also conveys to its audience a number of simple truths they were probably unaware of - truths about HIV, truths about living with AIDS, truths about how we should treat one another. And in doing this *Philadelphia* takes an important step toward mutual understanding, mutual respect, and ultimately mutual caring.

The last question to answer is what does an audience take away from the film. *Philadelphia's* audience and *The Living End's* audience are left with very different emotions and very different messages. We come away from *Philadelphia* with moral issues clarified and emotions explained. We understand that Denzel Washington is a better person for having met Tom Hanks and having his homophobia challenged. We understand that "these people" (I use quotes specifically because there is a distinct

division established and maintained between the gay and heterosexual characters and communities throughout the film) are not really so different from "us" (now I'm confused). Like good audience members we learned that it is okay to be afraid of AIDS, indeed most people are, but you should not be afraid of people with AIDS. Finally, by doing its best to make sure there is not a dry eye in the house by the end of the film, we are given just a fraction of an understanding of the devastation AIDS causes in our society. In all this *Philadelphia* does an excellent job of raising awareness and promoting positive attitudes about AIDS and people with AIDS.

In contrast *The Living End* leaves its audience with moral ambiguities and confused emotions. As his film is about so much more than AIDS, Araki leaves us with so much more to think about. The element of anger in the film is left completely in the viewer's lap (here, I think, is where Araki and Lee are most similar). Where good does triumph over bad in *Philadelphia*, in *The Living End* good and bad become obsolete concepts. These concepts become obsolete precisely because of the existence of AIDS in the film. The constant juxtaposition of Luke and Jon and the way they live their lives reminds us that however we define good and bad, and whoever we may identify with in the film, both men are going to die. And both men are going to die in a world that is essentially hostile toward them. This painfully simple fact calls into question almost all conviction and faith one has. Araki does not seem to be in any hurry to try to reconcile these questions for his audience.

What is amazing is that even though he leaves all of this with his audience, he is also able to leave us with something positive. There is an empowering element to the film. The freedom Luke has, and his ability to act out his desires and wishes completely free of moral confines, provides a great vicarious thrill (for how many people who have experienced discrimination can honestly say they did not want "that fucker's head cracked open") while at the same time forcing us to question how we could achieve change in a more socially acceptable manner². A final positive in the film is the ending which really confirms a comment Araki made in the interview, that despite the desperation and ugliness in the world, despite being told once again that sex is taboo and lethal, we continue to have hope, and find beauty, and even enjoy sex every once in a while. And these moments of "euphoria and bliss" may be one of the things to save us from complete destruction.

² Morals aside there does seem to be some kind of ultimate filmic justice being dolled out here. After all, if Arnold Schwarzenegger is allowed to kill hundreds of Arabs without caring, why shouldn't Luke be allowed to kill half a dozen murderous homophobes?

FOR *Philadelphia*



Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington in *Philadelphia*

By Richard Lippe

I want to offer a few comments on *Philadelphia* and why I think the film is a valuable and important piece of aesthetically sophisticated and socially conscious filmmaking. *Philadelphia* is a rigorous, intelligent and passionate film and it shouldn't be treated as an insult to gay people. As a gay person and a critic, I want to defend the film and argue for its considerable accomplishments.

When *Philadelphia* was released last winter it received positive reviews from the mainstream press and, perhaps to everybody's surprise, became a box-office success. Since its release, the film hasn't generated a great deal of discussion or debate within the mainstream press; *Philadelphia* and its concerns were eclipsed by *Schindler's List* which during the winter and spring months of 1994 was almost incessantly debated - as a Spielberg film, as entertainment, as education, as an effective metaphor for the contemporary world situation. Obviously the mainstream

press feels more comfortable dealing with the Holocaust (in the past) than with AIDS and homophobia (in the present). Whereas *Schindler's List* remained in the forefront of the media's and public's interest, the responses to *Philadelphia* have been primarily restricted to film journals and/or the gay press. But in this arena also the film has received little discussion or debate; instead, it is most often panned and dismissed as a piece of work which deserves the loathing of any responsible gay person. A notable exception is a thoughtful piece by Don Hannah in the December 24th, 1993, issue of *Xtra!*, a local gay newspaper. Alternatively, as an example of a negative review and almost hysterical attack on the film, see the piece by Roy Grundmann and Peter Sacks in *Cineaste*, Vol. XX No. 3, 1994.

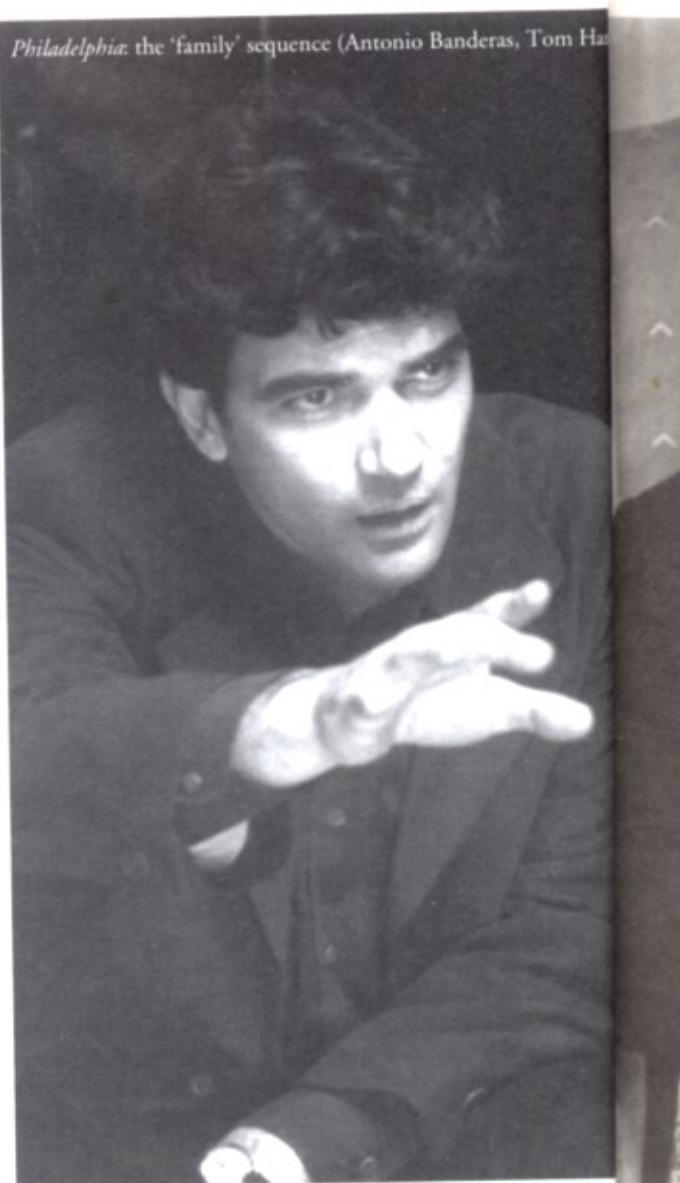
While it is understandable that the gay (and marginal) press is cautious about Hollywood films in general and particularly one dealing with AIDS, there seems no perspective in many

of these reviews. There is a complete denial that the film might have any positive qualities or be of some value to the gay viewer. The most frequent tactic is to argue from what the film isn't or doesn't do: 1) It is about a white middle-class male and *doesn't* deal with AIDS victims within minorities; 2) Andrew Beckett/Tom Hanks and his lover Miguel Alvarez/Antonio Banderas aren't shown in a realistic manner - the film *doesn't* sufficiently depict an intimate, loving and above all sexualized relationship; 3) Beckett's family and their response to a gay son/AIDS are idealized and *aren't* credible. After cataloguing what the film doesn't do, the reviewer than moves on to claim that what it *does* do is to encourage the viewer to identify with Denzel Washington's Joe Miller and his homophobic stance. Essentially, these arguments are put forth, I believe, because the reviewer is 1) hostile to any mainstream film that attempts to be serious and can't be dismissed as 'typical' Hollywood fare, that is, mindless and reactionary; and/or, 2) assuming that a film about gays and AIDS needs to be, if it has meaning or relevance to a gay viewer, made by members of and for the gay community. The anti-Hollywood attitude taken towards *Philadelphia* is mirrored in the response of the gay press to two early 80s gay-themed films — *Cruising* and *Making Love*, the former was denounced because it portrayed gays as promiscuous and s/m devotees (the film's explicit connecting of patriarchy and homophobia was ignored), while the latter film was dismissed on the grounds that it was soft-centred and made too many concessions to the mainstream audience by endorsing a 'heterosexualized' monogamy: obviously, a 'no-win' situation. Although both of these films have their formal and political limitations, they are much more interesting, complex and challenging as socio-cultural documents than their critics claimed. You don't have to read Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* to know that Hollywood has treated gays extremely badly, encouraging stereotyping and the notion that homosexuality is a deviance or sickness. Nevertheless, criticism demands a more rigorous approach than the categorizing of a film as being either good/right and bad/wrong — Hollywood films, and popular culture in general, are after all often riddled with ideological contradictions and can and do provide more than a single socio-cultural meaning. And, it should be obvious to any attentive critic that *Philadelphia* was never intended to be a queer film or that the audience/market the filmmakers had in mind was primarily the gay community (of course, this doesn't mean that the film's director, Jonathan Demme and scriptwriter, Ron Nyswaner, who is openly gay, were either indifferent to or antagonistic towards the gay community). *Philadelphia* needs to be seen in relation to the conventions of the Hollywood cinema and not those of the queer cinema which has stronger ties to the *avant-garde*, the documentary film, the independent and/or political cinema.

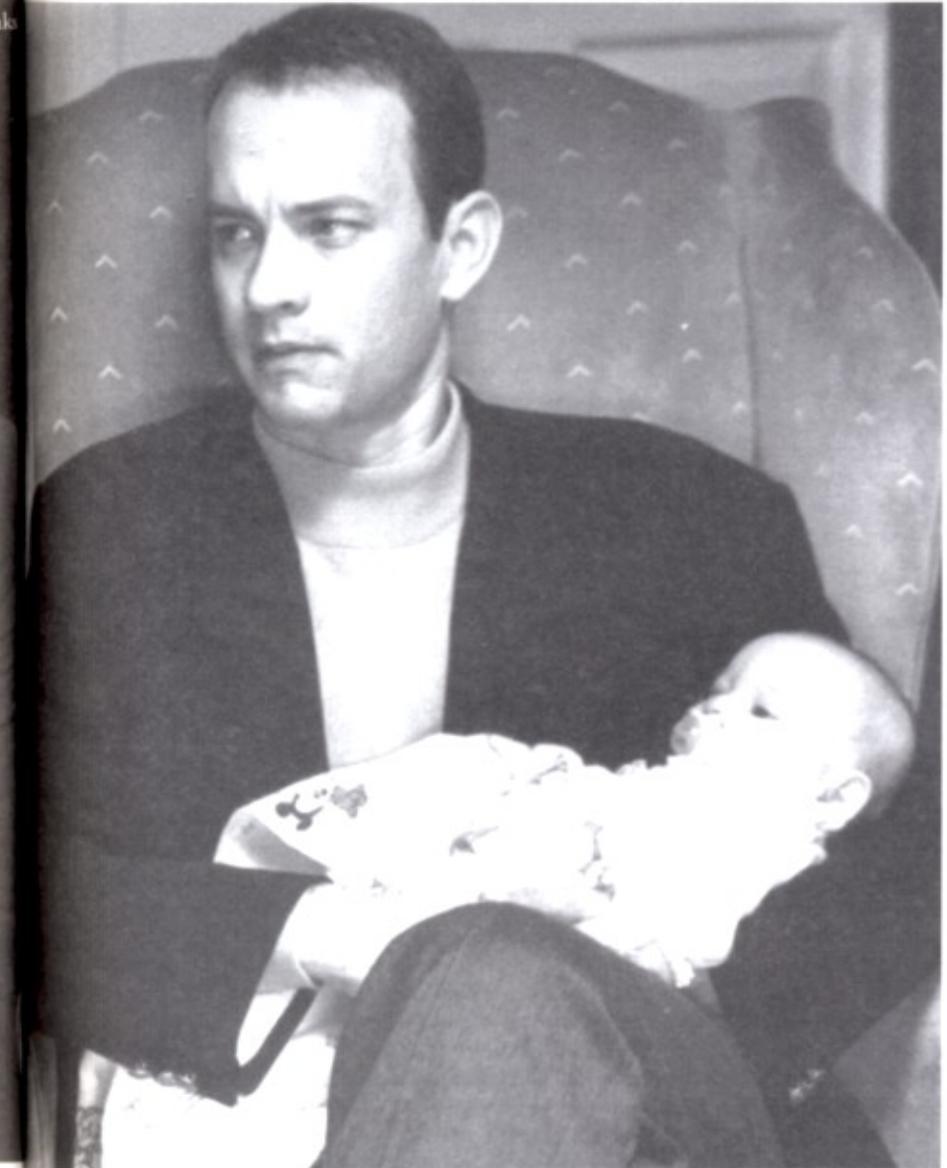
In response to the first of the above-mentioned arguments raised against *Philadelphia* and its content, the film is centred on a white, middle-class male, and employs an actor of Tom Hanks' calibre and appeal, most likely, because the filmmakers wanted to reach a large audience. Clearly, Demme was concerned about making a commercially successful film. If *Philadelphia* wasn't a box-office success, the industry would undoubtedly refuse other AIDS film projects, claiming the subject had no market value. I don't think this decision designates either a race or class bias. Many AIDS victims are white, middle-class men. *Longtime Companion's* gay men are white and middle-class but I don't recall that the film was faulted for not dealing with class and race. And, in any case, the film features Antonio Banderas, and Denzel Washington in a particularly prominent role, indicating the filmmakers' awareness of the race issue.

Although Andrew Beckett's lover, Miguel, isn't conceived as a fully rounded character, it is relevant to the film's political agenda that he is a Latino. If the film is, as the *Cineaste* critics say of Tom Hanks/Andrew Beckett, "white bread", it would then be to the film's alleged conservative interest to give Beckett a "white bread" lover. Their comment illustrates a disregard for what is on the screen; but it also indicates a misunderstanding of what are the filmmakers' tactics and priorities — *Philadelphia* is about AIDS and homophobia and the relationship between Beckett and Miguel isn't intended to be the film's focal point. If Demme and Nyswaner had foregrounded a gay couple's love life, the film would be another narrative.

Philadelphia: the 'family' sequence (Antonio Banderas, Tom Ha



To take up the complaint that the relationship isn't sufficiently sexualized, arguably, Demme and Nyswaner didn't want to distract and possibly alienate their heterosexual audience with a transgressive sexual/erotic display. (It was still possible in 1993, I discovered, to shock university level students with the kissing scene in *Making Love*; at least six students out of seventy-five or so attending walked out of the screening room when the kiss occurred.) But, regardless of the filmmakers' tactical motivations, what constitutes a depiction of intimacy and sexual/romantic commitment is subjective; despite some critical claims that the rapport between Hanks and Banderas isn't realistic, i.e., 'that is not the way my lover and I interact', I have no problem with the credibility of the relationship. The Beckett/Miguel relationship is meant to be about their present-day intimacy, love and friendship and these elements are essentially there. They are almost tangible in the final scene between the two.



audience identification figure, that the viewer confronts homophobia and is given a lesson on how it is naturalized. Miller defends his masculinity using it as a touchstone for what he considers the 'norm'. It is his notion of masculine heterosexual privilege that allows him to make the homophobic remarks he does. As the film progresses from the scene in which Miller confidently asserts his homophobia to his wife, Miller begins to understand gradually that his own insecurities about his masculinity produce the homophobic impulses he harbours. Miller comes to this perception after realizing the extent to which his confidence about his heterosexual/masculine self was shaken when another black man mistakenly thought he was gay because he's defending Beckett in court. Miller also

Philadelphia is transgressive in its direct approach to homophobia and remarkably defiant in its presentation of the nuclear family and its response to a gay family member. Andrew Beckett's family is patently 'non-realistic'; it seems naive to assume that the filmmakers intended the Beckett family to be taken as a portrait of an 'average' American family. The film is employing the elasticity of realist cinema — we are presented with a supportive family that is offered as a role model and, arguably, an image that the audience will, if not embrace, at least consider and possibly (ideally) aspire to. As with much of the film, Demme taps into the highly sophisticated relationship between film, Hollywood, filmic conventions and the viewer — it isn't for nothing that Beckett/Hanks' mother is played by Joanne Woodward who, in addition to calling attention to the star system as do Hanks and Washington, evokes along with her husband Paul Newman a long-standing tradition of being associated with liberal and humanist causes. While a family like the Beckets may not exist for most gay people in real-life, it doesn't mean that the film lies — the film is suggesting what could and *can* be — it is realist cinema employing wish-fulfilment — a cinematic tradition which is familiar and a means of criticizing the actuality of everyday existence. (Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* is an example and Robert Benton's *Places in the Heart* offers a crystallization of this fantasy/reality imaging in its concluding sequence.)

Although Andrew Beckett is the film's central protagonist, *Philadelphia* is equally concerned with Joe Miller — in fact, he may be the film's most significant character. It is through Miller, who comes closest to being an (heterosexual)

begins to fully comprehend the fact that homophobia is prejudice and nothing more. Miller's experiences with homophobic behaviour, his growing interaction with Beckett, the defence lawyer's ruthless tactics and Beckett's fight to defend himself both professionally and as a gay man all contribute to the moment in the courtroom when he says: "Let's just get it out in the open. Let's get it out of the closet. Because this case is not just about AIDS, is it? So let's talk about what this case is really about. The general public's hatred, our loathing, our fear of homosexuals and how that climate of hatred and fear translated into the firing of this particular homosexual, my client, Andrew Beckett." For the words, 'this case', we can substitute 'this film'. *Philadelphia* is a confrontational film. Like Jonathan Kaplan's *The Accused*, which also uses the structural device of a trial to articulate its position and argument, *Philadelphia* is a highly didactic film — it is a teaching film but never so in a pretentious or condescending manner.

Demme's casting of a black actor in the Joe Miller role is particularly inspired. That Miller is a black man brings another layer to the film's concerns about bigotry. As white people oppress non-whites, Miller, as a black heterosexual middle-class male, oppresses gays. And, having Miller serve as an identification figure means that a white viewer is identifying with a black man who, in turn, both practises and has been a victim of discrimination — the initial bond Miller makes with Beckett occurs when the librarian wants Beckett to leave the reading room fearing that his presence upsets the other patrons. (Racial prejudice and homophobia are connected by having Joanne Woodward say to her son: "Well, I didn't raise my kids to sit in the back of the bus. You get in there and you fight for your rights.") Furthermore, Miller's identity is complicated by having Denzel Washington play the role; Washington brings his star image to the film and its connections to Spike Lee's work, particularly *Malcolm X*.

Philadelphia uses Joe Miller to give a personal face to homophobia suggesting that it isn't something 'out there' or alien to the 'average' person. But the film is also committed to acknowledging the degree to which homophobia is institutionalized within the society. Its pervasive and deeply ingrained existence is personalized by Charles Wheeler/Jason Robards and his law partners. These men, who under different circumstances might be regarded as gentlemen and pillars of the community, are people who have the authority, wealth, prestige to shape the moral and legal realities of our social lives. These men are dangerous and they are, as the film indicates, highly devious when their notions of masculinity/normality are threatened; they are willing to employ a female lawyer, Belinda Conine/Mary Steenburgen, to 'front' for them, giving the public a false impression of an openness to social and sexual equality. But, when it comes down to the fundamentals, these men have no integrity, compassion or humanity. Unlike Joe Miller, these truly powerful men have no interest in or commitment to people who don't conform to the image they consider 'right'. The film is indicating with Wheeler that it is men like him who control the US government and have the power to decide what should and can be done about AIDS. *Philadelphia* is, in great part, as the title

signals, about America and its socio-political contradictions.

The relationship between Joe Miller and Andrew Beckett is conceived with care and understanding. Miller develops an increasing respect for and admiration of Beckett but Demme and Nyswaner don't attempt to suggest that the men become 'buddies' and that the differences in their personalities and lives cease to exist. In fact, the film acknowledges that the interaction between the two men is highly complex and shouldn't be simplified or treated in a sentimental fashion. To that end, Demme and Nyswaner have constructed a highly expressionistic sequence which again stretches the boundaries of realist cinema: the Maria Callas aria sequence arguably contains the film's most intimate moments and the experience Miller, Beckett and the viewer share cannot be reduced to any easy summing up. The extraordinary alternating close-ups of Miller and Beckett as the latter becomes increasingly moved by the music and gives himself to its drama and emotionalism communicate, I think, an intense rapport that has no direct 'meaning' but speaks of a complex of feelings, desires, longings, needs. The film here moves beyond the issue of sexual orientation and division and Miller's response in the following scene with his family indicates he has been profoundly affected, wanting to express and share love, tenderness and companionship. I find it hard to believe that critics can interpret the aria sequence and its aftermath as an illustration of *Philadelphia*'s homophobic nature. But, then, Demme and Nyswaner are trusting their audience and asking the viewer in this instance to respond as subjectively as do Miller and Beckett.

While Hollywood has produced a number of films which can be read metaphorically as being about AIDS (*Dying Young* and *Alien*⁴ are two recent examples), *Philadelphia* is the first mainstream film to actually make AIDS its subject matter. Given that the film comes some ten years into the AIDS crisis, the gay community has had ample time to formulate what a Hollywood AIDS film should be and do. Demme and Nyswaner were under a great deal of pressure to produce a film that would meet the approval of a highly diverse group of people ranging from radical to conservative. Obviously, the film could have been more — more direct about gay sexuality and love. The explanation as to how Andrew Beckett allegedly contracted the AIDS virus is, to say the least, extremely evasive; and the film doesn't really place Beckett and his lover in the context of a gay community or an AIDS support system outside his immediate family. These concessions to the mainstream audience weaken the film. On the other hand, *Philadelphia* shouldn't be burdened with the responsibility of making a definitive statement. *Philadelphia* is a beginning and it sets a high standard for the films that will hopefully follow. As Cory Silverberg says in his article elsewhere in this issue, *Philadelphia* is concerned with putting forth a few simple facts regarding gays, AIDS and homophobia. Homophobia is very much a reality and it needs to be repeatedly named, exposed and countered. The film's makers are clear-minded about their project and their goals and I respect their decision to make the film they did. I think *Philadelphia* is an admirable achievement which speaks intelligently and touchingly to both gay and non-gay viewers.



Smith family tensions: Mary Astor (seated), Leon Ames, Lucille Bremer, Judy Garland

'Meet Me in St. Louis': Smith, or the Ambiguities

By ANDREW BRITTON

In Capitalism, *The Family and Personal Life*, Eli Zaretsky writes: 'The family, to the Victorian bourgeoisie, was a "tent pitch'd in a world not right". "This is the true nature of home", wrote John Ruskin; "it is the place of peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division ... So far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it . . . it ceases to be a home; it is then only a part of the outer world which you have rooted over and lighted fire in". It stood in opposition to the terrible anonymous world of commerce and industry: "a world alien, not your world . . . without father, without child, without brother." The Victorian family was distinguished by its spiritual aspect: it is remote, ethereal and unreal - "a sacred place, a vestal temple". As in the Middle Ages, so now with the bourgeoisie, the domain of the spirit had once again separated off from the realm of production.'

Meet Me in St. Louis is set in a precise geographical location at a precise historical moment - 1903/4, the turn of the century - yet the temporal specificity is, instantly, mythic: simply to plot a course within those historical/topographical coordinates is already to proceed across a landscape which has been colonised by mythology, and from which history has been expelled. St.

Louis is as much 'south' as one can be while remaining 'north', and in a film in which the supreme disruption is figured as a move to New York, one set of the ambiguous connotations relating to 'south' is powerfully evoked - the connotations of elegance, refinement, culture, 'organic community', which Twain, in his denunciation of the myth, associates with the European tradition of aristocratic, chivalric romance of which Scott is the supreme, and most pernicious, exponent. (The myth is, then, dualistic, contradictory - alongside the ethos which produces *Gone With the Wind*, the stress on the contaminating rottenness of southern Europeanism - Poe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Faulkner. One notes in this context the extraordinary ambiguity of the attitude to the south in, say, Ford.) Simultaneously, '1903/4' calls up the myth of 'Edwardianism' - the last halcyon days of the nineteenth century before the twentieth begins in 1914, to which Elgar, writing in 1917, pays significant tribute: "Everything good and nice and clean and fresh and sweet is far away never to return."

Meet Me in St. Louis (1944) is roughly contemporary with *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943); and while, in all three films, the myth is placed, its invocation, in the context of the family (the romance of the family, as opposed to what Freud means by 'the family romance' - the Oedipal relation with which the films also concern themselves), testifies, in various ways, to its potency. Welles' response to the "magnificence of the Ambersons" is as systematically ambivalent as Minnelli's to the Smiths, and in Hitchcock's film (on the script of which the Thornton Wilder of *Our Town* collaborated). Uncle Charlie, the 'monster' whose psychosis is directly attributed to the American family, tells his niece, as three generations gather round the family dinner table (children, parents, grandparents in the photo), "Everyone was sweet and pretty then - not like now". Anne Newton, in the same film, not only reads *Ivanhoe*, but also aspires, like southern ladies "in books", to gather orchids with white gloves.

The difficulty inside the sense of nostalgia (less apparent in the Hitchcock which lacks that sensuous response to the object of criticism so characteristic of the Welles and the Minnelli) can be defined by offering, as a third term, Henry James. *Washington Square*, set in the 1830s, written in 1880, is as trenchant an analysis of bourgeois patriarchy and its associated oppression of women as any the realist novel has produced. Yet the book's marvellous tension depends not only on the ambivalent response to Dr. Sloper (both monster and angelic intelligence, both the figure of repressive social law and supremely refined [self-] consciousness), but also on a topographical ambivalence. The revulsion from the urbanisation of New York ("the long shrill city"; "the murmur of trade had become a mighty uproar") is only half concealed by irony at Dr. Sloper's expense, and has, as its corollary, the sensuous, inward evocation of the very culture the novel condemns ("This portion of New York appears to many persons the

most delectable") for which, at one point, the narrator actually apologises ("My excuse for this topographical parenthesis . . ."). What is 'tension' in *Washington Square* becomes, increasingly, vacillation. The culture, after all, determined James' repression of his homosexuality; and that repression (inseparably, the refusal to follow through the logic of the social analysis) produces, finally, the impotent male protagonists who have never "had their lives" so characteristic of the late period (*The Beast in the Jungle*, *The Ambassadors*). The sub-text of the latter novel is, indeed, the novel about gayness that James is incapable of writing. The ambiguities of nostalgia emerge very strikingly, in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, in the singing of 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas', in which Esther attempts to console Tootie (and herself) by escaping from the present through creating the future (New York) as the past ("Happy golden days of yore"). The project is doubly, and disturbingly, inflected by giving the song, as context, Tootie's desire to dig up her 'dead' dolls from her graveyard and take them with her to her new home.

The New York/St. Louis antinomy is an opposition between oppressive, dehumanised urbanisation ("cooped up in a tenement") and the 'organic community'; between 'the city' and a city which, nevertheless *isn't* a city. "It just doesn't seem very big out here where we live". The New York of *Meet Me in St. Louis* is not the "wonderful town" of *On the Town* (and is the use of 'town' there, rather than 'city', significant?), but the metropolis of the anti-urban tradition discussed by Morton and Lucia White (*The Intellectual Versus the City*). The Whites suggest that the crux of hatred of the city is the hatred of "commerce, industry and massive immigration" (consider the importance of Mr. Smith's being a businessman, and the film's repression, from its ethos of 'southness', of the blacks), and that therefore anti-urbanism did not emerge, as far as the American city was concerned, until the nineteenth century. They quote Crevecoeur who distinguishes between the "simple and cordial friendliness they [visitors] are to expect in [the] cities of this continent" and the "accumulated and crowded cities" of Europe. "They are but the confined theatre of cupidity; they exhibit nothing but the action and reaction of a variety of passions which, being confined within narrower channels, impel one another with the greatest vigor." The 'bad' city, while it suggests compactedness, anti-freedom, the negative of American space, commerce ("cupidity"), also evokes, in this description, a sense of violent, seething, untrammeled, implicitly erotic energies - the city as repository of libido, so central to the film noir. Typically, Crevecoeur admires, in contemporary New York, both the 'enlightenment' social values (hospitality, a contained cosmopolitanism) and that sense, crucial, also, in Franklin, that America is the place where universal engagement in commerce does not entail destructive competitiveness and is consonant with perfect social stability. Non-competitive free enterprise not only "binds the whole together for general purposes" but contains sexuality - "Industry and com-

stant employment are great preservatives of the morals and virtue of a nation" (*Poor Richard's Almanac*). To the extent that it draws on Crevecoeur's pre-industrial American city and makes use of conventions for the presentation of sexuality arrived at by a process of sublimation, *Meet Me in St. Louis* and the genre to which it belongs (small town domestic musical/comedy) suggest a sort of modified pastoral convention.

'1903/4' becomes in fact, the point at which 'city' can still mean 'community'; and one can compare the film, in this respect, to *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). In Capra's film the myth of community depends for its efficacy on the freezing of the development of capitalism at a certain point - the point before which capitalism's defining characteristic - the desire to produce an economic surplus - has become evident. Hence the film's central structural opposition between George Bailey (James Stewart) and Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore), between the accumulation of capital and the constant diffusion of capital back into the community ("Your money's in Joe's house"), translated into useful, socially beneficial objects; between, that is, 'the capitalist' (bad) and the circulation of capital without capitalists, no one at any point making a profit at anyone else's expense. On this level, the film's repeated crises, which finally reduce Bailey to attempt suicide, are essential to its project, in that without them Bailey would be seen to be becoming Mr. Potter. One can relate this to Zaretsky's remarks to the effect that at the moment of the supreme development of bourgeois capitalism the family, its basic unit, is imaged as a refuge from it by saying that Capra's film moves towards locating the family within an essentially decapitalised capitalism, and that *Meet Me in St. Louis*, while on one level roundly denying the family's immunity, operates on another as if the denial were not taking place (it can be read, that is, as if it weren't).

One can approach an analysis of the ambiguity through decor, an iconography at which point *It's a Wonderful Life* again provides a point of reference. The imagery of the last five minutes of the film, after George's 'salvation' - snow laden streets, trees festooned with fairy lights, decorations, presents, warmth, hospitality, 'hearth and home' - relates directly to the iconography of a certain kind of Christmas card, still extant, frequently with a Regency/Victorian/Edwardian setting; the image, for example, of a coach travelling across a snowy landscape towards the lighted windows of a house just visible in the distance, or of passengers disembarking in the snow before a glowing doorway. Whatever has been done thematically - and *It's a Wonderful Life* has been profoundly subversive - the iconography has its own potency based on a prospective sense of 'being at home inside' - the anticipation of warmth, security, sociality, apartness from 'outside'. Consider the way in which, in the first scene of *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943), Betsy's self-confidence, her (illusory) sense of self-coherence, is associated with the spatial confidence of the inside/outside opposition by the device of framing her and her interlocutor against windows

beyond which snow is falling - the film being concerned thereafter, simultaneously with the breakdown of self-coherence and the dissolution/transgression of boundaries.

The credits of *Meet Me in St. Louis* are set within rococo gilt frames, with cameo insets of flowers in vases; and the film's temporal advances (associated with transitions in nature - the passage of the seasons) are marked by dissolves from a sampler-like image to its 'reality'. The picture, literally, 'comes to life'; and the first instance of this (the movement from the credits to the narrative) as well as subsequent ones, reinforces the sense of entering the picture through camera movement - through the smooth, elaborate crane-cum-tracking shot which carries us forward into the fiction by accompanying the movements suddenly revealed within it - the horse drawn wagon heading up the street and then the figure of a boy riding a bicycle towards a large house. The concept of 'the frame' will be crucial in the film; and here the entry to the picture which comes to life is the entry to a defined, mythological space, a space of confidence, a conventionalised world bounded, ordered, delimited by a frame, appropriate expectations for which have already been sufficiently defined by the credits sequence. Frame and convention (generic and representational) make the spectacle world cohere, the coherence completed by that self-projection into the frame which the film encourages. Like the Christmas cards, the opening shots set up the anticipation of 'at homeness', which becomes, immediately, inseparable from the notion of the family, in that the film invites very strongly an identificatory regression not to childhood as it was, but to a cultural myth of "childhood-in-the-family-as-it-ought-to-have-been-and-might-possibly-be". The film is the produce of a society in which the myth, the need for the idea of the family is so intensely powerful that it can depend on functioning as a *petite madeleine* for individuals whose particular experience may not correspond at any point to the image of the family that is being offered.

This is the point perhaps, to suggest certain qualifying elements which feed into the film from other sources. If obviously Hollywood affirms the family massively one must give equal emphasis to the complementary impulse to reject it, both being rooted in the sense of home as "vestal temple", the sacred domain of woman as the embodiment of civilised social values. The most obvious form of the rejection produces that on-going tradition of flight from home/community/woman from Thoreau to *On the Road* and *Cross of Iron*, frequently accompanied by a paradoxical, despairing nostalgia for what has been lost ("You can't go home again"). Equally important is what one might call the 'alternative small town tradition', the first major instance of which is Melville's *Pierre* and which proceeds through Twain (*Pudd'nhead Wilson*, *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*) to Sinclair Lewis (*Babbit*, *Main Street*) and Sherwood Anderson (*Winesburg, Ohio*). It is also significantly developed by James (consider the concept of 'Woollet, Massachusetts' in *The Ambassadors*).

In the context of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, certain char-

Grandfather (Harry Davenport), Esther, and the dance card.



acteristic elements of the genre need to be stressed.

1. On the first page of *Pierre* Melville makes the connection between the myth of the small town, a debased pastoral convention reinforced by the anti-urbanism of Wordsworthian romanticism, and the sublimation of sexuality. The innocence of this Arcadia ("brindled kine") consists in the ignorance of the energies which will later disrupt it.

2. Those energies are embodied, in the pastoral, by Comus; and the link between sexuality, the devil and the darker nature of the forest emphasised in Milton's poem is reiterated, in the New World, in the Paradigm libido/wilderness/Devil/Indian the forces which surround and threaten the community. In *Pierre* as in *The Scarlet Letter*, they emerge inside the community as female sexuality. Both novels, indeed, suggest versions of *Comus* with the sexes reversed. *Pierre* and Dimmesdale in the role of 'the lady' (who now succumbs to temptation) and the sexuality of both Hester and Isabel associated with "the blackness of darkness" and vast savage natural forces (thun-

der and lightning, the forest). But the attitude to sexuality and to 'the fall' is correspondingly more ambiguous; and the tendency to affirm the energies embodied in the women and their liberation of the men as human consciousness is offset by the chaos they unleash and the emasculation they threaten to induce. There is a direct line of descent from Isabel and Hester and her daughter Pearl ("a demon offspring") to the small town 'vamp' (Gloria Grahame, say, in *It's a Wonderful Life*, or supremely, Bette Davis in *Beyond the Forest*), Tootie in *Meet Me in St. Louis* and the devil children of the diabolist cycle, Regan and Carrie. It is a line which, as *Pierre* makes clear, has to be associated with the hubris of Melville's heroes: Ahab's vow "in nomine diaboli" has been inherited, in the modern horror movie, by the female child.

3. The characteristic form of the possessed child's rebellion is a repetition of the crime of Satan - the overthrow of the father (or, as in *Carrie*, the phallic mother), the figure of the Law. *Pierre*'s last gesture on leaving his ancestral home is to destroy his father's portrait

("Henceforth, cast-out Pierre hath no paternity and no past"); Tootie kills Mr. Brockhoff; Regan becomes the Devil, kills her potential step-father and, finally, both representatives of Holy Church. In all three cases the Law of the Father continues to re-assert itself, and the child is vanquished.

4. *Pierre* is built on the theme of the Oedipal romance, and its enforcement within the idealised nuclear family. Pierre, impelled by love of Isabel, breaks out of his incestuous involvement with his mother only to discover that Isabel is his sister; and in the final chapter beholds in the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, the icon of "the two most horrible crimes . . . possible to civilised humanity - incest and parricide". Once more the apparent innocence of the female child ("so sweetly and seraphically blonde a being") assumes the burden of guilt, but now as the emphasis on "blonde" conveys, the stigma passes from the dark lady to the likeness of Lucy, the archetypal 'sweetheart' of the opening chapters, and from her to Pierre, who is guilty in her image. The indissoluble themes of parent-murder and Oedipal confusion which continue to inform the Gothic (*Psycho*, the devil child films) are also paired in *Meet Me in St. Louis* in which the Hallowe'en sequence has its significance in the rejection of Father and Oedipus complex, the two determinants of the all-American romance.

5. The sense that the domesticated small town male is castrated is an obsessive cultural preoccupation and surfaces in numerous movies (*Shadow Of a Doubt*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *The Searchers*, *King's Row*, etc.). The castration may be the punishment for rebellion against the Father (Ahab's lost leg; Pierre's vision of Enceladus, and his final cry of "Pierre is neuter now!"); Regan's appropriation of the phallus and her recastration by the two priests in *The Exorcist*). Alternatively, and far more frequently, the man is castrated by women; the small town is a matriarchy and the phallus is stolen by a monstrous wife/mother (Mrs. Gilendinning in *Pierre*, the narrator's wife in Melville's outrageous short story, *I And My Chimney*. Mrs. Newsome in *The Ambassadors*, the inhabitants of the boarding school in *The Beguiled*, etc.). The man is unmanned by the contagion of domesticity, and is left either absurdly embattled ("I and my chimney will never surrender") or hopelessly lost and ineffectual (Strether) or pernicious (Babbitt). If Tootie relates to the first type of Satanic hubris, then John and Mr. Smith relate clearly to the second.

The richness of this material is clearly inseparable from its profound contradictions. To take only the question of female sexuality; while the energies embodied in Hester, Isabel, Regan, the film noir vamp, Davis in *Beyond the Forest* Jennifer Jones in *Duel in the Sun* are supremely fascinating (and thus, at some unconscious level, espoused) precisely because they are subversive of patriarchal order, as soon as that order has been subverted and the satisfactions of anarchy indulged, order must be instantly reasserted, if only by the punishment of the agent. The rationale of the contradiction emerges most

clearly in the extremist cases. Thus, while Isabel frees Pierre from castration by his mother and releases the impulse which rejects the patriarchal law, it is only, as his sister, to trap him in incest and castration once more. Tootie and Regan kill the Father, but the very act entails the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, and must be cancelled out. The breakdown precipitated by female sexuality is to be desired, in that the institution it undermines is felt as repressive, but the cost is always too high, in that it is always seen, quite correctly, to involve a threat to possession of the phallus. Time and again woman plunges order into anarchy, but the terms of the new order are always so horrific that the old is reinstated. *The Exorcist* is an almost diagrammatic illustration of the process, and represents as such a partial return to sources - a new inflection of the meeting of the small town and the Gothic, Satan and female sexuality in *Pierre* and *The Scarlet Letter*. It transpires that the small town, the outpost of a civilisation created and consecrated in the name of woman, has actually taken the serpent to its bosom. Satan has not been expelled to the wilderness at all. The guardian of the "vestal temple" herself contains the forces which continually threaten to destroy it. Hence the crucial significance of those films in which the link is made between the Lady and the Indian.

The link between the family film and the horror film (touched on by Robin Wood in *Personal Views*) emerges very concisely in that extraordinary moment in *Meet Me in St. Louis* when, on Hallowe'en night, the Smith house turns into the Bates house from *Psycho*. The space of confidence opened up in the first shot of the narrative is strangely lost as a forward tracking shot takes us this time towards a Gothic mansion at night, scarred by the shadow of a dead tree, the orange light of the windows no longer connoting a safe 'inside' but assimilated by a dissolve to a shot of lurid skull masks and candles burning inside scooped out pumpkins. The continuity between the two aspects of the house is carried out in the decor - in the heavy clutter of Victoriana, objets d'art, drapery, and its tone of slightly suffocating luxuriance. Pairs of white candles transform mantelpieces into altars (the "vestal temple"), while the bad connotations of 'southness' return in busts and figurines of Moors. *Psycho* makes the undertones explicit with its pastoral/allegorical icon of female nudity, its stuffed birds, its cast of clasped hands, its beckoning baroque statue presiding at the foot of the staircase.

The sublimation of female sexuality (the attempt to "block the hole" in Stephen Heath's phrase) can never rid itself of the perpetual danger that the hole will reassert its presence. Regression to home and mother - to home as mother - contains the possibility of refinding mother's body, of ending up 'inside' with a vengeance (the Bates predicament). Indeed, consider that cycle of films, contemporaneous with the forties' domestic musical/comedy and the film noir about dead or missing women who remain as portraits, as potent forces immanent in the decor. The cycle is initiated by *Rebecca* (1940) which sets

up also the recurrent Hitchcock image-complex of appalling mansion, impotent male and castrating mother (Rebecca reborn in Mrs. Danvers) which proceeds through *Notorious* and *Under Capricorn* to *Psycho*. The structure is, of course, not simply Hitchcock's, but an element of the American Gothic on which Poe worked countless variations.

Meet Me in St. Louis is one site of intersection of various complex strands. Its conventions permit the containment of conflict, but the particular process of containment exposes conflicts with unusual clarity.

If 'St. Louis' suggests a myth of the organic community in a lost Golden Age, then the idea of 'the fair' is the furthest reach of the myth - "It must look like a fairy land". The last moments of the film - the camera tracking into a huge close up of Esther's face on her rapt, repeated murmur of 'Right here where we live' - convey an achieved union of the 'normal'/everyday and the miraculous. They put forward, implicitly, for the spectator's consent, the proposition that "your home town too is miraculous if you only stop to look at it". (*It's a Wonderful Life* offers a similar conclusion while extending it through the allegorical mode to induce a sense of cosmic confidence in an anthropomorphised universe.) The proposition draws on a strangely secularised variant informed by the 'entertainment-as-Utopia' syndrome (see Richard Dyer's essay in *Movie 24*) of a familiar assertion of the Puritan ethic — the divine is immanent in the mundane - which lends itself to a multitude of possible inflections (from Herbert's "the daily round, the common task" to Hopkins' "inscape").

With the exception of the choruses and Judy Garland's solos, the songs in *Meet Me in St. Louis* are characterised by a process of 'naturalisation'; it is stressed that various characters can't sing 'well' (professionally) or aren't used to singing (Agnes, Grandpa, Tootie). The device finds its most beautiful expression in the singing of 'You and I', where Mrs. Smith's lowering of the key to accommodate her husband's voice and her quiet, unobtrusive anticipation of the key line ("Through the years . . ."), magnificently convey that reaffirmation of monogamy and family unity through the guidance of woman which culminates in the transformation of solo into duet while, around the singers, the family returns, silent and unobserved. The naturalisation both foregrounds the aspect of 'performance' and partially covers it; the characters are singing because they want to, not because they are singers.

One can relate this to the way in which the songs are not marked off and isolated as 'numbers', but erupt out of the narrative, unless the sense of 'tableau' or 'performance' is justified diegetically, as, for instance, in 'Skip to My Lou' or, most conspicuously, the 'Cakewalk', which is explicitly a performance for an audience in the narrative, and which places the proscenium arch within the frame. Thus the first statement of 'Meet Me in St. Louis' devel-

ops through Lon's humming it sporadically in the course of conversation, Agnes taking it up 'naturally' as she goes upstairs, her passing it on to Grandpa, and, finally, its transference to Esther as she arrives in a buggy with her friends - each shift of voice, as it introduces an individual binding him/her into the family, an emphasis reinforced by the movement of each individual into or towards the house. Thus Esther's appearance recapitulates the arrival of Lon in the first shot and reinforces the notion of 'binding in' by formal symmetry. Subsequently both elements (naturalisation, community through song) are amplified in Mr. Smith's remark that everyone is singing "that song", St. Louis becoming a grand extension of the family. The fluid continuity between musical and non-musical elements is carried also in the *mise-en-scène*, in that characteristic flow of movement which both asserts spatial continuity and, as in Ophuls, a self-conscious delight in physical grace, in the 'musicalisation' of the camera (consider, for example, the scene in which John and Esther extinguish the lights, with its complex counterpoint between (a) Esther's deliberate fabrication of 'romantic' atmosphere, (b) the acknowledgement of respect for and embodiment of the romantic sensibility implicit in the elaborate crane shot in which the scene is realised and (c) the deflation of both artifice and romanticism which proceeds from John's insuperable stolidity). The 'binding in' is extended to the audience by way of that forward craning movement towards the 'inside' initiated by the first shot and repeated as a structural principle thereafter in, for instance, the two dance scenes.

But the first song sequence already introduces conflicting elements, which cluster around the pointed opposition between work and leisure. As Agnes enters the kitchen, she remarks to her mother - "You should have taken a swim with us", to which Mrs. Smith replies - "With all I have to do". All the singers in the first number - Lon, Agnes, Grandpa, Esther - are non-workers; and their 'freedom' is set against the domestic labour of Katie and Mrs. Smith and the business of making ketchup which everyone wants to taste different. At once, a tension is set up (and stated, here, in a light key) between the celebration of the leisure and release from responsibility which is shown to be expressive of, and to produce, unity (Lon, Agnes, Grandpa, Esther, St. Louis all united across space and time in the singing of the song), and work within and for the family which precipitates conflict (the ketchup). Two parallel and mutually opposed lines of suggestion have been established: the wonderful is everyday versus the wonderful is opposed to the everyday, in the second case the singing becoming instantly anarchic in its implications. One might compare the use of "the fair" here with that of the myth of Vienna in *Shadow Of a Doubt*. It is at the moment that she is released from work by her daughter at the beginning of the second dinner sequence that Mrs. Newton, primping her hair in front of the mirror, begins to hum the 'Merry Widow Waltz', immersing herself in the ethos of 'romantic dream', the sexual connota-

tions of which have already been sufficiently established.

The first song is also remarkable for that assimilation of Grandpa to the female children which reasserts itself in the scene in which Mr. Smith announces the family's departure for New York, and which, while it underlines the work theme (the young and old can be 'irresponsible' because they are dependents), also feminises him and places him on a more fundamental level with the women against the man of the house. (One should add that this too is ambiguous in that Mrs. Smith's "What about Katie, Grandpa and the chickens?" gives him and the female servant the status of non-human property.) Indeed, 'Meet Me in St. Louis' systematically links all the children and Grandpa with the emphasis on the female children (Lon's contribution is minimal): Agnes and Esther in the first statement, Esther and Rose in the second, with, via the dissolve to the duet from Tootie's "Wasn't I lucky to be born in my favourite city?", the implicit collaboration of the youngest daughter. It is the father who, in disrupting the song, violates the unity ("For heaven's sake stop that screeching!"), and through him the theme of the oppressiveness of the work undertaken in the name of the family at once becomes explicit.

There are nine song sequences in the film. Of these all but one ('Skip To My Lou') are initiated by women and with the same exception, individual male characters feature significantly in only two - Grandpa in the first statement of 'Meet Me in St. Louis', Mr. Smith in 'You and I'. Apart from one line in 'Skip To My Lou' ("Lost my partner"), the 'hero' does not sing at all. The pre-eminence of women musically - which coincides of course with the narrative premise - is complex in its implications; and it becomes necessary at this point to consider Judy Garland's solos and their relation to the film as a whole.

The first Garland number, 'The Boy Next Door', establishes a set of related motifs and images:

1. Woman as predator. The number is preceded by Rose's provocative walk up the porch steps in an attempt to attract John's attention, and then by Rose and Esther strolling out and posing themselves nonchalantly on the balcony for the same purpose. Both strategies are conspicuously unsuccessful;

2. The reversal of the convention which dictates that sexual aggression is the prerogative of the male is contained within and defined by the convention which prescribes marriage as the destiny of the female. Esther and Katie have just been discussing Rose's "problem" ("The brutal fact is she isn't getting any younger") and throughout the film the concept of 'marriage at all costs' is repeatedly foregrounded;

3. Inseparably from 1. and 2., woman as image: both Rose and Esther attempt to draw the attention of the male by creating themselves in and as conventionalised images of 'femininity'. Songs and nonmusical narrative alike emphasise Esther in a frame; the frame of the proscenium arch in the cakewalk and, in 'The Boy Next Door', 'Merry Little Christmas' and the 'Bannister Song' the frame of the

portrait, the icon. Indeed, the 'Bannister Song' makes the imagery explicit by uniting the connotations of theatre and of picture. The number is preceded by the extinguishing of the lamps, the prelude during which Esther's 'performance', however unappreciated, is in preparation (the perfume which she 'saves for special occasions'), and which subtly suggests the lowering of the house lights around the 'stage' which the staircase will finally provide. Esther leaves John gazing up at her from the foot of the staircase and, at his prompting ("How does it go?"), takes up the poem into song and herself into poetic image ("He watches the picture smiling"). Elsewhere, the concept of the picture frame is echoed by the frames of window and mirror and reinforced in, for instance, the scenes in which Esther prepares for the two dances, where the adoption of an artificial and oppressive 'femininity' is associated with the donning of costume ("I feel elegant but I can't breathe").

Once again, the image of the frame works in terms both of the narrative and of the relation of spectator to film. 'The Boy Next Door' is a courtship display for the absent male spectator in the diegesis (John), and also a performance on set for the absent spectator who will be provided by the screening of the film in a cinema. Just as Esther stages herself in the window frame, longing for John's attention, so Judy Garland the star, performs a musical number for the contemplation of the spectator. And, like a spectator, John is passive. He does not sing - he watches.

The terms in which the Esther/John relationship is initiated are structurally crucial. It is emphasised that Esther does not know John, and that her imagination has transformed him into an ideal figure: "My only regret is that we've never met/Though I dream of him all the while." John is introduced, from the girls' perspective, standing on the lawn in front of his house dressed in white, the whiteness suggesting not simply an immaculate ideal, but also a *tabula rasa*, an emptiness onto which emotions can be projected. Thus if Esther's desire at this point is expressed in self-recreation and self-projection as an image, then the object of desire is perceived in similar terms. Posed in profile with his pipe, John is instantly an icon of 'normal', clean-cut manhood, the guardian of heart and home, the complex tone of the scene - and of a great deal of the film - consisting in the fact that while the conventions of desire are made ironically explicit (desire is shown to be determined by convention), we are nevertheless invited to feel a degree of sympathetic involvement with characters who are uncritically governed by them.

In his account of the female Oedipus complex which, satisfactorily resolved, initiates 'normal' womanhood and locates the female child 'correctly' within the institutions which precede her, Freud suggests that the girl's desire is transferred from the father to the man who, as husband, will replace the father. Glossing this in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Juliet Mitchell remarks that "there is an obvious link between the security of Oedipal father love and

the happy hearth and home of later years". By marrying the boy next door, who appears at once in the image of the father, the girl reproduces the family structure and in the same action, reproduces society. Similarly the girl relinquishes her hostility to her mother (consider Esther's concern to echo Mrs. Smith's judgement in the ketchup controversy), and identifies with her in relation to the father. This structure remains beneath the open hostility to Mr. Smith in the second half of the film in that the proposed move to New York directly threatens the smooth reproduction of the same social/familial order through the marriage of the two eldest daughters. The female rebellion against the real father (Mr. Smith) operates in the interests of the law of Father (the institutions of patriarchy) and is explicitly concerned to perpetuate the status quo. Similarly, of course, acquiescence in the move north would operate in the same interests. By concentrating on the social construction of desire within the family, the film succeeds in setting up a dramatic context in which the constraints on the female characters to reproduce the patriarchal order become apparent, all the more strikingly because of the apparent impotence of the given father figure.

Mitchell continues, quoting Freud, that it is through her identification with her mother that the girl "acquires her attractiveness to a man, whose Oedipus attachment to his mother it kindles into passion". At the beginning of *Meet Me in St. Louis* John is living alone with his mother (his father, presumably, dead), and during the extinguishing of the lights sequence, his only response to Esther's perfume is the remark that reminds him of his grandmother. At the end of the second dance sequence, the Esther/John relationship is ratified in an image which condenses, with perfect simplicity, the logic of the 'family romance'. Esther, having been duly punished for her conspiracy against Lucille by dancing with each of the "perfect horrors" she has originally selected as Lucille's partners, is finally rescued from the last of them by her grandfather who cuts in in the name of an 'oriental' custom which fixes the status of woman as that of an item of property ("When a stranger admires one of your possessions, it's common courtesy to offer it to him"). Esther responds with relief and gratitude ("You're the first human being I've danced with all evening"), and grandfather tells her how proud he is of her acceptance of the penalty he has imposed. The camera cranes up and we see grandfather guiding Esther as they dance, towards and behind a huge decorated Christmas tree at the far end of the room. When Esther emerges on the other side, she is dancing with John, and the waltz which the orchestra is playing becomes 'Auld Lang Syne'. The moment is beautifully exact: as the old year becomes the New Year, John takes the place of the father/grandfather and loves Esther in the image of the mother/grandmother, the connotations of ritual re-enactment and repetition underlined by music, imagery (Christmas - the annual festival of the 'holy family') and movement (the unbroken circle).

But the film is significantly more complex than this in ways which have, perhaps, already been implied and which are bound up with John's status as 'the ideal'. One needs to account for the fact that while, on one level, the Esther/John relationship is offered as a paradigm of the 'American romance' (girl meets and marries boy next door), John scarcely exists in the film as anything more than a token and is played and presented with an innocence which markedly sets off, by contrast, the intense vitality projected by Judy Garland. One needs to account, that is, for the discrepancy between a dominant ideological project which is clearly there in the film, which will be read as being there, and which is given in the narrative data, and the contradictory implications set up by the realisation of the project.

The point here is the extraordinary way in which John becomes effectively superfluous to the four of Esther's songs supposedly inspired by him, the songs being transmuted into a form of communion between Esther and her own desire. In only one of the four (the Bannister Song) is John directly physically present, and not only is it sung by Esther, the "smiling picture" of the lyric, in praise of her own beauty ("The loveliest face in town"), but also, during the singing, she scarcely looks at John at all, her gaze remaining fixed on some distant space off-camera while John continues to gaze entranced at her. (The device is repeated in 'Merry Little Christmas', in which Esther is clearly addressing herself rather than John, whose absence, as Esther's pretext, is signalled before the song begins by the lowering of a window blind, or Tootie for whom the advice delivered in the song is conspicuously ineffective). Similarly, 'The Boy Next Door' culminates in Esther's poses before the mirror in the hallway and her rapt solitary dance; and the first meeting with John is preceded by further intense self-scrutiny in a mirror framed by blue material similar in shade to that of her dress. Downstairs we discover that John is also dressed in blue and Esther is continually associated with the colour throughout the first half of the film.

Esther's creation of herself as a picture comes to appear less as a method of attracting John than as a way of allowing an image of herself to emerge for herself. John functions as an alibi which allows her to dramatise her own desire on a private stage for her own eyes. Hence the immediate appearance, in 'The Boy Next Door', of the image of the mirror, and Esther's performance before it: the 'ideal', the "overestimated object" of romantic love which, according to Freud, is always informed by the primary narcissism in which the child "was its own ideal", recedes or becomes the catalyst of those moments in which desire erupts for itself. Consider 'The Trolley Song'. Esther begins singing in the moment at which she sees John racing after the trolley and catching it at the last minute. This is also the moment at which she turns her back on him to look inside the tram, and the entire song is delivered in the midst of a circle of admiring women who form her background and chorus, gazing in at her as their

centre. On the line "His hand holding mine", Esther clasps her own hands together, and both her singing and the impulse which informed it are cut short abruptly when Esther becomes aware of John's presence next to her. They seat themselves immediately on opposite sides of the trolley platform and Minnelli dissolves directly to the Hallowe'en sequence. Thus while 'The Trolley Song' is ostensibly precipitated by John's arrival and is dedicated to him as the 'ideal' ("He was quite the handsomest of men"), the actual staging of the number physically excludes the male; and the one moment in which a man intrudes into the performance, by raising his hat to Esther, provokes her withdrawal, shaking her head emphatically.

It is useful at this point to recall Lacan's definition of desire: "Desire is irreducible to need because it is not in principle a relation to a real object which is independent of the subject, but a relation to the phantasy. It is irreducible to demand in so far as it seeks to impose itself without taking language or the unconscious of the other into account, and requires to be recognised absolutely by him." Thus one can point to two aspects of 'The Boy Next Door'. Esther's desire relates to the phantasy of John ("We've never met"), an emphasis underlined by the dialogue before the song ("I want it to be something strange and wonderful"). Simultaneously the dance before the window captures exactly "the desire to have one's desire recognised" which the scene has already established as a ruling motive.

The songs in *Meet Me in St. Louis* mark repeatedly a point of tension between containment and overflow. They continually override their authority while only being conceivable within its terms. They suggest moments of licence and bear as such all the hallmarks of the defining restrictions. Thus the celebration of female desire in 'The Trolley Song' is dramatically contingent on John, but does not survive his physical presence. Similarly 'Skip To My Lou', the communal youth dance, while it takes place within (is contained by) the Smith household, clearly functions in part as a rebellion against ideological constrictions - a rejection of hearth and home ("I've run away to a neighbouring state") and of prohibitive morality ("I don't care what my folks think"). Indeed, the end of the song is marked by one of the girls falling over onto the floor, the incident suggesting very simply the shock of 're-entry', the abrupt transition between two worlds. More significantly, the very concept of 'St. Louis' itself is redefined in this context. From the first scene of the film the dream of 'the fair' is the alibi for the release of those energies which are defined in opposition to 'work'. Yet the extraordinary bleakness and flatness of tone of the final scene (to which Robin Wood has drawn attention, op.cit.) is a sufficient testimony to the failure of correspondence between the energies and the ideal in the name of which they have been allowed to emerge. It becomes clear, indeed, that in taking 'the fair' as ideal, the energies have been devoted to their own entrapment. The fair is the repressive, quotidian reality etherealised and the final scene is dominated by

imagery of sublimation. The exhibition itself is merely glimpsed, across a stretch of water, as a display of brightly shimmering lights and has been built, we are told, on a drained bog. John, briefly alone with Esther, tells her - "I liked it better when it was a swamp and there was just the two of us" - before they are summoned to rejoin the family, two nuns shrouded in black appearing spectrally in the background. The connotations could scarcely be more explicit: sexual energies, the life of the body, associated directly in John's remark with the swamp, are to be purified by assimilation to the small-town-as-Celestial-City, and the summoning of the couple to join the family group is presided over by figures suggestive equally of Holy Church and death. Real relations and conditions of existence are sublimated in imaginary ones: the fair, twinkling beyond the mirror line marked by the river (and the final track in on Esther's face suggests strongly that the fair is the outward projection of an internal image), becomes exactly, in Lacan's phrase, "the presence of an absence of reality". It is crucial here that Tootie, though subjected anew, like Esther and John, to the prohibitions of the renewed, reaffirmed, idealised family (she is asked not to eat too much, "you'll spoil your dinner"), proceeds at once to undo the sublimation in her account of her dream (which is to be set against Esther's "I never dreamed anything could be so beautiful") - "I dreamt a big wave came up and flooded the whole city and when the water went back it was all muddy and horrible and full of dead bodies!". The apocalyptic vision, so central to the American Gothic from Poe to Corman and *The Exorcist*, suggests not simply a wish (it emerges in a dream) or a portent (The Fall of the House of Smith), but also the perception of a reality, of that face of St. Louis concealed by the fair. Only a scene previously Mr. Smith has declared "We'll stay here till we rot". Tootie knows that they are rotten already. It is, perhaps, significant that she shows scarcely any interest in the fair throughout the film.

This sublimation theme has already been firmly established in the treatment of money: Mr. Smith's attempt to repress the energies which find expression in music is balanced by the attempt of the female members of the family to repress the economic reality in which the family is bound up, and which dictates Mr. Smith's decision to move to New York. To Rose's "I hate, loathe, despise and abominate money!", Mr. Smith replies at once, "You also spend it"; and the exchange neatly inflects the film's central opposition in economic terms - St. Louis in apotheosis as 'the fair' versus St. Louis as economic unit. Thus the final scene, as it sublimates sexuality into marriage and family, represses money elsewhere (into 'New York', into the swamp), and forgets the problems of the continuing economic viability of the family which Mr. Smith has brought forward ("I've got to worry about where the money's coming from"). The three occasions on which the family is reassembled after the divisive split attendant on Mr. Smith's announcement all depend consciously on the repression of those problems. 'You And I',

while it reconvenes the family group, affirms not the family but the couple (the family does not join in and is not mentioned in the lyric), and affirms it too in isolation from society in 'metaphysical' terms of the triumph over time and adversity ("You and I together, forever"). The immediate problem - which is, precisely, the family as a locus of conflicting interests - at a moment of economic crisis - is completely avoided. Subsequently, Mr. Smith's change of heart after Tootie's destruction of the snow people is presented unequivocally as a piece of stoical window-dressing, the violence of which comes over equally as bitter resentment of the family which has forced it on him, the suppression of his own desires and aspirations and an attempt to make himself believe that it is, after all, his own decision. Indeed, the 'happy ending' is achieved by two displays of 'male dominance' which are shown to be victories in campaigns of attrition mounted by the women: the forthright proposal of Rose's suitor ("I don't want to hear any arguments") is at once qualified by Esther's remark - "He's just putty in your hands". The women have won, and the palm of victory is their own entrapment with their castrated men, inside patriarchal institutions.

This brings us to Tootie - the crux of the film, the register of its defining tensions. If Mr. and Mrs. Smith suggest the couple achieved as basic unit of the family, each with their 'sphere' (home and business) and Rose and Esther are characterised by the desperate struggle to insert themselves in the same structure and perpetuate it ("We can't be too particular"), then Agnes and Tootie, the youngest sisters, embody and express a potential anarchy, a possible subversion of the structure. The film is quite clear-sighted about the kind of possibility: there is not a hint of sentimentality, nor any pretence that the return of repressed energies in Tootie are uncontaminated by repression. Consider, for example, her obsession with death (Twain's Emmeline Grangerford in *Huckleberry Finn* affords a useful parallel in contrast), which is used as an overtly neurotic inflection of capitalist possessiveness; she hoards dead matter ("I'm taking all my dolls - the dead ones too, I'm taking everything"), and part of the impulse behind the destruction of the snow people is the determination that no one else should have them if she can't. Similarly, the dolls suggest a morbid surrogate family in regard to which her inferior status in the Smith house is replaced by the power of life and death ("I expect she won't live through the night").

This last represents, perhaps, the correct emphasis. The power of life and death is the power of the Father; and Tootie's usurpation of the Father's function is the extreme instance of that pattern of reversal of which she is the focus, whereby the ostensible values of the Smith household are inverted and their underlying logic revealed. Thus, for example, in the present case, the obsession with death and physical cruelty comes across both as a distorted recognition of the body, the physical nature which the family ethos represses, and as a magnification of sadism

latent in the family group in any case, and surfacing in such jocular exchanges as that between Agnes and Katie about the fate of Agnes' cat ("I'll stab you to death in your sleep and then I'll tie you to two wild horses till you're pulled apart"). It is a measure of the film's intelligence that Agnes and Tootie can be seen both as profoundly subversive of an order based on repression and as themselves already caught up in the network of repressiveness. Both elements frequently emerge simultaneously: Agnes and Tootie's undisguised giggling amusement at Esther's romantic daydream after her reconciliation with John serves equally as an implicit comment on the boy-meets-girl romantic love which the family so easily recuperates and as a type of the oppressive, prying inquisitiveness on which Rose immediately comments ("It's very difficult for a person to have any private life in this family").

Three scenes repay particular attention.

1. The first dance sequence might itself be compared with that extraordinary, because emblematic, moment in *The Exorcist* in which Regan, having been packed off to bed, intrudes on her mother's party while the adults are gathered round the piano singing 'Home, Sweet Home' to the accompaniment of a priest, and pisses on the carpet. Agnes and Tootie, likewise sent off the bed, likewise intrude and are compared by John, who sees them first, to vermin ("There are mice in the house"). The grownups adopt at once the familiar tone of maudlin patronage ("She's such a sweet little thing"), and Esther attempts to appease Tootie's desire to join in by suggesting that she sing an 'appropriate' nursery song - that is, to perform as a child. Tootie refuses vehemently ("You know I hate those songs!"), and proceeds, in the face of some opposition, to sing a forbidden ballad ("I was drunk last night, dear mother"), with the word "drunk" censored. The moment is remarkable and of considerable complexity. Tootie's appearance immediately follows the singing of 'Skip To My Lou', in which the group's resentments and rebelliousness have been contained in the allowable licence of 'party high spirits'. Tootie violates the licence both of the party and of her own role as female child (she should be in bed, should be a sweet little thing), and does so by mimicking not simply intoxication, but also sexual reversal - the presumed singer of the ballad is male. Again, the outrageousness is contained: the song promises future sobriety in return for mother's forgiveness, the forbidden word is not pronounced, and the entire incident is promptly 'covered' by the performance of 'The Cakewalk' in which marriage and settlement is reaffirmed ("Two live as one, One live as two, Under the bamboo tree"), as is woman's place within it ("I want to change your name"). It is important here that Tootie's ballad is the only unaccompanied musical number in the film, and that 'The Cakewalk', by emphasising the conventions of 'performance' to a marked extent, restores, formally as well as ideologically, a sense of the proprieties. But there is a residual tension, analogous to that underlying the 'Trolley Song'. The voice presumed by the lyric, as by the drunkard song, is male but the lyric

The Hallowe'en Sequence: Tootie (Margaret O'Brien) volunteers to 'kill' Mr. Brockhoff



is performed by two sisters. As in the other case, while the song affirms the centrality of the male, the performance excludes him. 'The Cakewalk' finding a further nuance in giving a song in praise of exogamy ("I want to change your name") to two female members of one family. The ironic play of connotations and contradictions is central to the film's concerns.

2. The Hallowe'en sequence. As I have tried to suggest, *Meet Me in St. Louis* implies a tension between the supremacy of patriarchal institutions and the impotence of particular men. The tension is beautifully expressed by the moment when, while the women of the household are gathered round the dining table waiting for Mr. Smith to come downstairs, a crash is heard from above as he trips over one of Tootie's roller skates. Raising her eyes Katie mutters dryly: "The Lord and Master!" The phrase is not simply ironic, since Mr. Smith's decision, in the ensuing sequence, to vet all incoming telephone calls is a sufficient demonstration of his real power, and the incident also prepares the idea, to be developed later, that he is as much encumbered by his family as the family by him. All these

connotations meet in the prevailing suggestion that the power structure of the patriarchal family is totally insufficient to the exigencies of the reality; and while to the extent that they are devoted to circumventing Mr. Smith, the women's actions proclaim that the power structure need not be taken seriously but merely lived with, they serve to reinforce the structure to the extent that they are supremely preoccupied with the necessity of marriage. It is appropriate then that Mr. Smith should fall on Tootie's skates, since in the Hallowe'en sequence it is not an individual, but the very function of the Father which, through Tootie, comes under attack.

The sequence takes the principle of reversal to its extreme and logical conclusion. The conventions of the domestic musical comedy become the conventions of the horror movie. With the exception of the film's opening sequence shot and the Trolley sequence (the latter largely involving, in any case, the use of back projection), the Hallowe'en sequence is the first to take place out of doors, and is structured by the motif of boundary transgression so fundamental to the horror genre: Tootie moves out-

ward from the space of confidence, the known and established world (for spectator as much as character) through a transitional zone, to that 'other space' where her self-imposed task must be executed. The visit to the Voodoo ceremony in *I Walked With A Zombie* and Lila's exploration of the Bates' house in *Psycho* offer suggestive parallels in that in all three cases the other space exists explicitly in an inverted mirror relation to the known space, and that each sequence moves towards the discovery, by the female protagonist, of a monstrously potent parent figure beyond the last forbidden door. The pattern, and its psychoanalytical implications, are generic 'givens' and the relation to the descent myth (and thus to structures which overflow the genre - see for instance, Propp's analysis of Russian fairy tales) is equally clear: in this case, Tootie has undertaken a mission which, if fulfilled, will entail a reward (acceptance by the other children).

The mission here is parricide and the spirit of Hallowe'en, as the film depicts it, is a massive, concerted rebellion against the Symbolic Father - the Father as Law, as totem figure, as the embodiment of power and prohibition. Thus Mr. Smith, the castrated small town father, becomes Mr. Brockhoff and is endowed, in Tootie's imagination, with all the ideas of absolute power and dark, forbidden energy which the 'real' father so conspicuously lacks - sexual potency and control of women ("He was beating his wife with a red hot poker"); indulgence in alcohol (remember Tootie's identification with a drunkard in her ballad); abominable rites ("He burns cats at midnight in his furnace"). It is of the essence, then, that Tootie's crime is not literal murder but a handful of flour in the face: she is not killing an individual but desecrating a totem.

Most significantly, given the film's concerns, the rebellion consists in the rejection of the Oedipus complex: all the boys are in drag, and most of the girls, including Agnes and Tootie. Momentarily, and fantastically, the basic principle of socialisation in patriarchal culture is triumphantly overthrown, gender roles disintegrate and, as household furniture is heaped joyously onto a blazing bonfire around which the children dance like demons or 'savages'. Tootie, the female child, is unanimously declared, in place of Mr. Brockhoff "the most horrible of all". It is this triumph of the child which distinguishes the Hallowe'en sequence from say, *Zombie*, *Psycho*, *The Exorcist*, *Carrie* and indeed the end of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, in which the repressive energies embodied in the parent figure are indomitable and enforce either 'tragedy' or the bluff of the happy ending; either 'things could not have been different' or 'things do not need to be different'. If the small town myth is, as I have suggested, the heir of the pastoral convention, both serving to provide extremely formalised models of ideal communities in which sexuality is rigidly contained, then the appropriate analogy for Tootie and the children is Comus and his 'rout'.

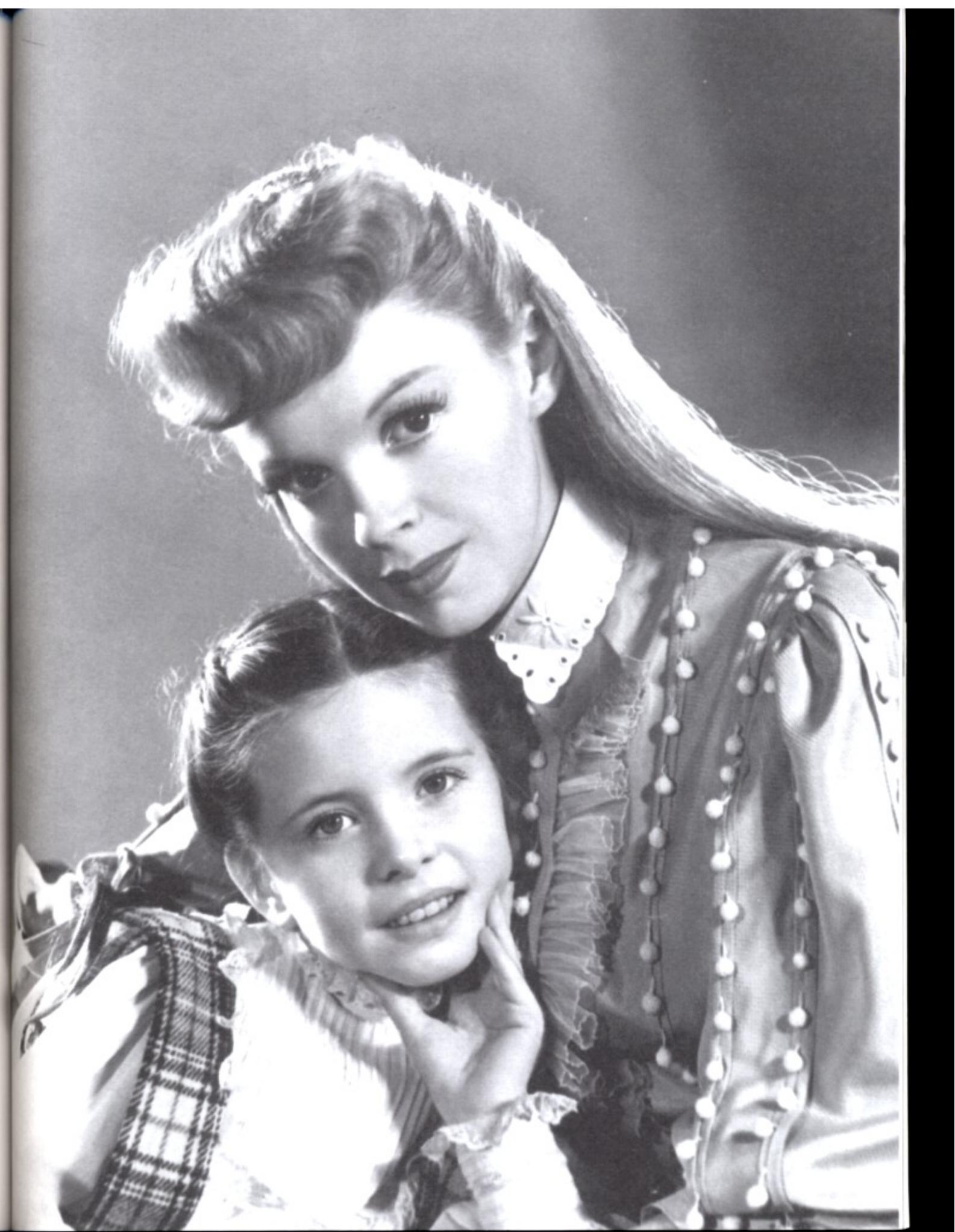
The contagion of anarchy spreads immediately into the world of order. Agnes and Tootie nearly succeed in

derailing a tram by placing a dress stuffed to resemble a body across the tracks, and Rose's outraged protest that everyone might have been killed produces from Agnes the sublimely amoral reply - "Oh Rose! You're so stuck up!" Disaster is averted by the intervention, appropriately, of John in the interests of the paternal order, but Tootie's lie (she pretends that John has not rescued her, but beaten her up) immediately precipitates the repetition by Esther in the 'normal' world, of the crime committed by Tootie in the underworld - Esther avenges her sister by beating up John on his own front porch. The misunderstanding is subsequently cleared up and 'natural' relations reinstated, but the *raison d'être* of the entire sequence is the re-enactment of breakdown in the Esther/John relationship with the accompanying inversion of purely conventional gender characteristics (the repeated phrase "you've got a mighty strong grip for a boy"/"for a girl"), and the willing assumption by John of a posture of masochistically passive submission ("If you're not busy tomorrow night, could you beat me up again?"). Indeed, the token of reconciliation becomes John's deliberate adoption in his request to Esther to help him turn out the lights, of the role of timid 'femininity' that she has previously exploited ("I'm afraid of mice"). The release of chaos reveals nothing if not that the proprieties are quite arbitrary, perilously fragile and contradictory: the roles which John and Esther are culturally required to adopt effectively invert the actual characteristics of the relationship.

3. The 'killing' of the snow people. While the sequence, which again takes place at night and out of doors, repeats the murder of Mr. Brockhoff, this time in the context of the Smith family itself, the particular inflection is significantly different and profoundly ambiguous. On one level Tootie's impulse is conservative: she dreads the prospective disruption of the status quo and, in particular, the absence of the Father (Esther discovers her sitting up so as not to miss Father Christmas: "I've been waiting such a long time! ... How will he find us next year?"). On a second level, the attack on the snow people is an attack on the Father, the intensity of which is exacerbated rather than assuaged by Esther's assurances that "some day soon we all will be together", since it is the united family that ensures Tootie's repression. The sequence ends with Tootie and Esther in tears, at the very moment that Esther's stoical insistence that "we can be happy anywhere as long as we're together" breaks down. The suggestion that it is "being together" which perpetuates the misery is very strong and it is maintained as an undercurrent to the end.

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Tootie and Esther Smith





Garbo and Cukor on the set of *Two-Faced Woman*.

Cukor AND Garbo

BY RICHARD LIPPE

I *Camille*

This article is the third and final installment on Cukor and his films. See "Authorship and Cukor: A Reappraisal" *CineAction*, No. 21/22, Summer/Fall 1990, pp. 21-34 and "Greta Garbo, The Star Image: A Corrective Reading" *CineAction*, No. 26/27 Winter, 1992, pp. 12-21.

Although the two films discussed here have no explicit gay content, we want to celebrate the work of a great director who at the end of his life came out as gay and a great star known to be bisexual, working together within the constraints of the Hollywood system and Production Code.

Although *Camille* is one of Garbo's best known films and is based on, as E. Ann Kaplan points out in her book *Women and Film*,¹ "... a historically significant classic melodrama...."² the film, aside from Kaplan's reading, seems to have been ignored by feminist and, for that matter, non-feminist critics. As the title of Kaplan's piece, "Patriarchy and the male gaze in *Camille* (1936)," suggests her critical position is highly informed by Laura Mulvey's theoretical writings; relying heavily on Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, Kaplan's project is to demonstrate how the film employs the male gaze for the purpose of "... dominating and repressing women through its controlling power over female discourse and female desire."³ Despite the emphasis Kaplan places on the male gaze in the titling of the piece, her reading of *Camille* doesn't develop an argument based on the operation of the notion. Instead, Kaplan's concern is that the film is about Marguerite's/Greta Garbo's victimization (she sacrifices her life for Armand's/Robert Taylor's future) and the blocking of her subjectivity, her desire. Applying a psychoanalytic-semiotic methodology, Kaplan tends to take a schematic approach (e.g., Marguerite and Armand experience Paris as the symbolic and the countryside as the imaginary), offering what is essentially a critical account of the plot. And, as such, Kaplan produces an adequate feminist critique, claiming that the film, if read against the grain, exposes the contradictory demands made upon women within patriarchy. On the other hand, Kaplan isn't interested in attending seriously to either the particulars of the material or the film itself; for instance, her reading seems to suggest that Armand is, like Marguerite, a victim of patriarchal-bourgeois-capitalist concerns and that these concerns are embodied solely in the figures of the Baron de Varville/Henry Daniell and Armand's father, General Duval/Lionel Barrymore.

1. E. Ann Kaplan, *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Kaplan identifies Cukor as a "women's director" and says that his participation in the film is relevant; yet, she doesn't offer any insights into how Cukor contributes to the project. At best, she claims that Cukor and the scriptwriters present the story, as does the play by Alexandre Dumas *fib.*⁴ from Marguerite's point of view. In introducing Cukor she mentions that he "... directed Judy Garland and Ingrid Bergman in two archetypal women's films";⁵ but, in a footnote, she tells the reader the films are *Gaslight* and *Born Yesterday*,⁶ the latter a Judy Holliday film. Similarly, Kaplan claims that Cukor was sensitive to the woman's point of view, but the director, Garbo, and notions about characterization aren't relevant beyond her interest in juxtaposing Cukor and *Camille* to Sternberg, Dietrich and *Blonde Venus*. In her chapter on *Blonde Venus* which follows the *Camille* piece, Kaplan says Sternberg was, unlike Cukor, "... totally uninterested in his heroine's roles or perspective." Employing Claire Johnston's argument, Kaplan states that Sternberg denied Dietrich a presence, making her into a sign which signifies "non-male"; and, following Mulvey, she contends he creates Dietrich as a fetish - his desire being to deny sexual difference, the castration threat.

On the one hand, Kaplan believes that the classical Hollywood cinema is totally given over to patriarchal discourse and, hence, must be rejected; on the other, she wants to suggest that a film like *Camille* can be read in a manner so that the film's ideological contradictions are revealed. But, ultimately, Kaplan's recognition that ideological contradictions exist within mainstream films is negated by her insistence that female viewers cannot really perceive these contradictions because of their social conditioning which encourages women to be sentimental, masochistic, neurotic, etc. - just like the on-screen images of women the female viewer is given to identify with. Despite her good intentions, Kaplan produces a portrait of women as viewers which is more than a little condescending. Women appear to be incapable of having their own perceptions about films; for Kaplan, the films give women a position which they automatically accept - the female viewer as passive is what Kaplan seems to confirm and reinforce in her discussions of realist cinema.

Just as Kaplan has no real belief that a female viewer might have an orientation to the melodrama or women's film that is more complex than her schema suggests, she has no interest in dealing with a female star such as Greta Garbo. To fit Garbo into her reading of *Camille*, she says of her: "... Garbo's particular kind of fragile beauty, only subtly sexual, was not threatening to women since she does not seem overly invested in her own beauty and sexuality. She is somehow always 'elsewhere', and, in addition, Garbo's pathetic situations evoke women's pity, appealing to their nurturing, maternal part."⁷ While I would agree that Garbo's persona doesn't convey narcissism, I think Kaplan's account greatly diminishes Garbo's screen presence. Garbo isn't fragile and she isn't passive; certainly, her *Camille* isn't a passive person nor does the character, as Kaplan later states, suffer a 'beautiful' death. On the

contrary, Marguerite's death in *Camille* isn't 'beautiful' in the way Kaplan implies⁸ - it doesn't solicit the sentimental, the maudlin. As enacted by Garbo, the death is about the loss of a life and not about sacrifice and reward or the gratifications of having Armand repent for doubting her 'goodness'. Additionally, Kaplan makes the claim that the female viewer 'uses' Garbo to 'love' Robert Taylor - what about the possibility that the female viewer 'loves' Garbo or both actors or that she identifies with Garbo's strength, intelligence and creativity?

In *Mythologies*,⁹ Roland Barthes analyses the play *The Lady of the Camellias*, providing an ideological reading of its content and specifically how the play endorses a masculinist/patriarchal (Barthes doesn't term it as such) and bourgeois ordering of gender and class relations. Barthes contends that this celebration of bourgeois values is mis-recognized by those female viewers aspiring to belong to the bourgeois class. Thinking that Marguerite's self-sacrifice is noble and beautiful, this audience embraces its own oppression. Although Kaplan doesn't refer to Barthes' piece, her discussion of Cukor's film is very much indebted to his analysis. But Barthes is providing an analysis of the plot and characters of the *play*; he isn't offering, as is Kaplan, a specific reading of its material.

In Barthes' reading, Marguerite's paramount desire is to be seen as an individual, as a somebody - ironically, this desire leads to Marguerite's offering up herself as an object. Similarly, Kaplan raises this issue, claiming that Marguerite has no sense of her worth, but her perception is at odds with what Garbo projects. Garbo's sense of self-possession is crucial to her interpretation of Marguerite - Garbo conveys assertiveness, independence and an awareness of the choices she makes and the reasons for making them. In *Camille*, Marguerite isn't simply a victim; and, her identity isn't reducible to what is conferred on her by men/patriarchy and the bourgeoisie.

The credits of Cukor's *Camille* indicate that both the Alexandre Dumas novel¹⁰ and play were used in the film's adaptation, and so I think it becomes necessary to read the Dumas works to appreciate fully the strengths of the screenplay crafted by Zoë Atkins, Frances Marion and James Hilton. To begin, the novel, unlike the play, uses a first person narration device; soon after her death, a young man who knew of Marguerite Gautier befriends the still grief-stricken Armand Duval who, in turn, relates his story to the novel's narrator. The story is essentially told from Armand's point of view and, in addition to providing eventually a catharsis for the character, the narrative serves to illustrate Armand's sensitivity, compassion and grief. The portrait drawn of Marguerite is sympathetic; the emphasis is on her desire to reform and prove her worth because of Armand's love. Marguerite's function is in great part to inform the reader that it is possible for a prostitute to be, in actuality, 'good' and capable of obtaining salvation. Marguerite becomes fully admirable by acknowledging that Armand's father, General Duval, is just in his demands that she give up Armand; in return for the sacrifice, Marguerite believes that she has been accept-

ed indirectly into the Duval family - the General promises his family will pray for her. In the novel's concluding summation, the strongest sentiments are given to the father-son reunion; to that end, Marguerite has been a relevant but expendable figure.

While the play presents the story from Marguerite's point of view, Dumas' adaptation is of a piece with his initial work. In the play, it is Marguerite herself who celebrates her willingness to die so that Armand will have the future his father wants for him. Even more so than the novel, the play glorifies the behaviour of General Duval and his commitment to the family. And, as in the novel, religion is crucial, with Marguerite asking for and receiving forgiveness for her past existence.

While retaining the basic plot of the Dumas works, *Camille* avoids the sentimentalizing of Marguerite's gesture to secure Armand's future and refuses to endorse General Duval and his values. On every level, the scriptwriters have constructed a vastly superior account of the story and particularly so in regard to the realization of Marguerite and her identity. For instance, there is nothing in either of the Dumas versions that is equivalent to the film's impressive theatre sequence in which Marguerite a) misrecognizes Armand as the Baron de Varville and b) objectifies Armand as an erotic object.¹¹ In addition to foregrounding and endorsing Marguerite's desire, the sequence establishes the viewer's empathetic identification with Marguerite/Garbo through the mood changes she experiences as she confronts the unfolding events. This long sequence contains close-ups which function to give the viewer access to Marguerite's thoughts and feelings; Garbo's subtle facial expressions register the character's internal responses to her surroundings. And, in the concluding scenes of the sequence, Cukor's *mise-en-scène* foreshadows the pattern of the relations between the Baron, Marguerite and Armand. In the staging of the scene in which Marguerite realizes that Armand is not the Baron, the Baron, in the background of the image, is in a theatre box positioned directly behind Marguerite's. The staging of the action establishes the Baron as a foreboding presence; later, when Marguerite and Armand go to the country, they discover that the château behind the inn at which Marguerite is staying belongs to the Baron.

It is appropriate that Marguerite is associated with the theatre in the film's introductory sequences, as *Camille* is concerned explicitly with the notion of woman and performance. As the above-mentioned sequence illustrates, Marguerite isn't at the theatre merely to display herself; she is required to give a performance convincing the Baron that it is his attention she most desires. And, as the film progresses, Marguerite is repeatedly placed in a position in which she must give a 'performance' to mask her own desires; for instance, when the Baron returns unexpectedly as she awaits Armand's late night visit, Marguerite is forced into making the Baron believe that she has had the intimate supper prepared in anticipation of his return. As played by Garbo and Daniell, this extraordinary sequence is highly charged with theatrical

bravado and culminates with both Marguerite and the Baron barely suppressing their actual feelings.

Marguerite performs for the Baron because she is financially dependent on him; later, in an effort to protect Armand's future, Marguerite gives a performance in which she renounces their relationship, claiming that she prefers the amusements the Baron offers her. Unlike such films as *The Actress* and *A Star Is Born*, in *Camille* the woman as actress isn't given positive connotations, as Marguerite's performance involves a denial of her personal fulfilment. Significantly, Cukor and Garbo are careful to distinguish between the character's awareness of when a performance from her is demanded and when she can be herself. Clearly, Marguerite is conscious of her performing skills; the film never suggests that she is given to embellishing her life through self-aggrandizing dramatization.

I have referred to scenes centred explicitly on Marguerite, performance and the theatrical, but Cukor's *mise-en-scène* on numerous occasions evokes the theatrical through a subtly heightened presentation of a dramatic incident. A striking example of this is Cukor's staging of the sequence in which Armand declares his love to Marguerite. The scene in which the declaration occurs is preceded immediately by the birthday celebration which itself carries theatrical connotations as a spectacle e.g., jokes, dinner, dancing. When Marguerite retires into her bedroom because of a coughing spell, Cukor shifts the film's mood towards the dramatic through his deployment of décor such as the mirrored dresser, the chaise-longue, the lit candles, and low-key lighting. On the one hand,

⁴ Stephen S. Stanton (ed.) *Camille and Other Plays* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1957). The novel *The Lady of the Camellias* was published in 1849; in 1852, Dumas adapted the novel into a play.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

⁸ "Greta Garbo dies beautifully in *Camille*" is the opening sentence of Cecilia Ager's well-known review of the film. See Alastair Cooke (ed.) *Garbo and the Night Watchmen* (New York: McGraw-Hill 1971), pp. 242-244. Although the review is somewhat playful in tone, Ager is serious-minded in her comments on Garbo's beauty and her performance skills. The reviewer's introductory sentence doesn't, as Kaplan and others have suggested in their indirect usage of the statement, claim that Garbo makes the death scene an aesthetic experience encouraging the viewer to appreciate the death as a 'beautiful' gesture.

⁹ Barthes, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-105.

¹⁰ Alexandre Dumas, *fib.* *The Lady of the Camellias* (New York: Popular Library, 1962).

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

In her analysis of this scene, Kaplan doesn't comment on Marguerite's desirous look which objectifies Armand. Instead, she refers to Marguerite's need to return the Baron's gaze to acknowledge his interest in her; according to Kaplan, in returning the gaze, Marguerite is constructed as the 'castrating' female. Kaplan doesn't develop this notion and there is nothing in the film to support it.



Camille and the Baron de Varville/Henry Daniell

the space connotes the private and the personal but, on the other, the *mise-en-scène* contributes to giving the scene a strikingly intense dramatic tone: it is precisely this combination of the intimate and the extravagant that characterizes Armand's declaration. In these scenes, Marguerite wears a white dress which is ornately trimmed and her bedroom is furnished predominantly with light-coloured objects.

Later, Cukor stages the narrative counterpoint of the bedroom scene, Armand's public denunciation of Marguerite, in visual terms that evoke and comment on the earlier scene. In the gambling house sequence, Marguerite wears a similarly decorative dress but it is dark-coloured and the décor of the room in which the confrontation takes place suggests the formal and the leaden; there is a strong light/dark lighting contrast which, in contrast to the bedroom scene, creates a harsh, almost sinister ambience. Again, Cukor's *mise-en-scène* foregrounds the theatrical aspects of the situation and, here, Armand demands an audience to witness his scornful outpouring.

In the Lambert book, Cukor begins his discussion of the film with the following:

'Irving Thalberg was going to do two pictures with Garbo, and he offered me a choice between them. One was *Marie Walewska*, with Napoleon as the leading man So I chose *Camille*. I'd seen the play, and I felt it would be a perfect meeting of the actress and the role. Certain people are born to play certain parts. (I'd never worked with Garbo, but I knew her slightly.) The play presented some enormous problems, because you had to make a modern audience understand its conventions. It came from a time when a woman's reputation, her virtue, was a terribly important thing - and a big bonanza for drama An audience had to understand the distinction they made in those days between a 'good' and a 'bad' woman, especially in that scene when Armand's father tells Marguerite

Gautier in a very high-handed, moral way how she's ruining his boy's life and she must give him up.' [(p. 108); and, later, he says:] 'Sentimentality instead of true sentiment, that was always the pitfall. The big trap in a story like this was to be sentimental. You had to find the real feeling and let it come through.'¹²

These comments, and others including mention of Zoë Atkins' innovative contributions to the film's screenplay, indicate Cukor's awareness of the material's implications regarding gender and class issues. In his version, Marguerite, from the beginning, is fully aware of her social position and the constraints placed upon her given her profession and her peasant origins. (Garbo suggests a sophistication that is at odds with the narrative's claims about the character's background. On the other hand, Garbo's sensibility defies class divisions. During the course of her career, she managed to enact credibly characters from various class positions. Garbo communicates intelligence, sensitivity, wit - qualities that aren't class-bound and, furthermore, she is an actress who never cultivated, on screen or off, a middle-class identity.)

Marguerite is conscious of the fact that her relationship with Armand is a transgressive act; on the other hand, Armand can, being male and a bona fide member of the middle-class, "go back", as Marguerite points out to his father. In *Camille*, the encounter with General Duval is crucial; Marguerite isn't, as occurs in the Dumas versions, seduced by the notion that her sacrifice gains her the admiration of her betters. After agreeing to end the relationship, Marguerite says, "Make no mistake. I do this for Armand and him alone." The film has Marguerite choose to sacrifice her happiness but this isn't presented as either a noble gesture or romantic behaviour on her part; rather, she knows the relationship cannot withstand the assault which social forces will inevitably enact.



Camille and Armand/Robert Taylor

To perceive Garbo's Marguerite simply as a victim is to ignore the forcefulness of her presence; it also demands that the viewer is indifferent to Cukor's handling of the character throughout the film and particularly so in regard to what he does with the presentation of Marguerite's death. By refusing to exploit the inherent emotionalism of the material through a heightened, 'excessive' *mise-en-scène*, Cukor makes Marguerite's death highly disturbing, communicating a genuine sense of the loss of a life; death in *Camille* isn't comforting, suggesting a transcendence of life and its demands. The sequence is lengthy but the emphasis isn't on the reunion between Marguerite and Armand nor is it on Marguerite's final declaration of her love. Rather, Garbo's performance is centred on her depiction of the character's struggle to resist dying, her thirst for life. In the film's opening images, Marguerite is introduced in a carriage and the effect is that of her being in a tomblike space; in contrast, in the film's concluding image, a forward tracking shot is used to scrutinize her lifeless face. Using a disciplined but highly expressive *mise-en-scène*, Cukor eloquently comments on the character's life and death.

Intriguingly, Garbo makes Marguerite a very feminine presence, which is reflected in the clothing she wears and her physical gestures and movements. Garbo's emphasis on the feminine is striking and, arguably, functions to make the character a more vulnerable figure; on the other hand, Garbo doesn't relinquish her customary contemplativeness and sense of the ironic, which provides her with a means to express the character's awareness of the underlying implications of the issues she confronts. Garbo's stress on the feminine and the vulnerable has a direct impact on Taylor's Armand; in *Camille*, it is the leading male protagonist who expresses gender traits that are traditionally attributed to the female: Armand is overly 'sensitive,' emotional, impulsive, romantic. And Garbo's Marguerite

has a desire for Armand that is both physical and involves an attraction to his more 'delicate' persona. Taylor's youthful presence has the effect of intensifying the maternal aspects of Garbo's persona: Armand behaves on occasions in a child-like manner, being unreasonably demanding and self-absorbed. The film foregrounds this behaviour in the bedroom scene in which Marguerite says to him, "What a child you are." But, in contrast to Taylor's youth and callowness, Garbo, who was six years older than the actor, projects a sophistication, maturity and wisdom that suggests she is the protective and responsible person in the relationship. As such, Garbo's Marguerite differs greatly from the Dumas creation which is that of a very young woman who isn't particularly intelligent and tends to be helpless and gullible.

To appreciate fully the progressive dimension of Cukor's *Camille*, it is necessary to discuss in some detail the film's male characters: Armand, the Baron de Varville, General Duval and Gaston. As played by Taylor, Armand is boyish, passionate and somewhat naive and idealistic; Armand is intended to be highly appealing and, to an extent, Taylor makes him so. Given this, it is most striking that Cukor repeatedly aligns Armand with the Baron. On the narrative level, the Baron is Armand's rival and seemingly polar opposite but, as pointed out in the discussion of the theatre sequence, Marguerite mistakes Armand for the Baron. As for the actors, there is more than a slight physical resemblance between Robert Taylor and Henry Daniell, with the latter suggesting an older, more aristocratic, intelligent and emotionally complex version of the former. More significantly, in addition to the Baron unexpectedly turning up and taking Armand's place at the late night rendezvous in Marguerite's quarters, the gambling house sequence has first the Baron and then Armand

¹² Lambert, *op. cit.*, p. 108, p. 111.

humiliate Marguerite in public. Obviously, what the two share is a mistrust of Marguerite - she is, after all, a woman and a member of the lower class. And, in this regard, it is highly fitting that Armand early in the relationship presents Marguerite with the copy of *Manon Lescaut*. While having qualities that make him conventionally appealing, Armand, like the Baron, is shown to be possessive and capable of cruelty if he feels threatened. The two men behave in ways that indicate they are both highly insecure and lacking in emotional generosity. Through his *mise-en-scène*, and pointedly so in the gambling house sequence, Cukor draws attention to the connections that link the two despite their supposed opposition on the narrative level.

Class and male privilege dictate the Baron's thinking and behaviour; yet, if he tries to 'buy' Marguerite, Armand, on the other hand, attempts to secure her through his 'emotional' commitment. There is no equivalent character to the Baron in the Dumas works and in *Camille* he is a figure of considerable fascination. Cukor, Daniell and the scriptwriters create a character that embodies simultaneously the brutish, the vulnerable and the sophisticated. While the Baron isn't intended to be in any way a likeable figure, he solicits, nevertheless, a degree of sympathy - there is the suggestion in the scenes in which he 'free's Marguerite by giving her money to pay her bills that, if the Baron were fully honest with himself and Marguerite, he would admit to genuinely loving her. And, it is the case that the Baron is being deceived by Marguerite who, although a woman of principles, is desperate about having a chance to fulfil her desires.

A much less sympathetic man than the Baron, General Duval is a representative of the bourgeois class *par excellence*. Marshalling the forces of patriarchal authority, the sanctity of marriage and family, religion, and morality, Duval employs whatever means at his disposal to ensure his son's future as a good standing member of the bourgeoisie. Although the film doesn't and, undoubtedly, couldn't (given the Hays Code) provide an outright critique of this character, *Camille* avoids having Marguerite, through her responses to his presence and requests, endorse *père* Duval; Garbo plays the scenes without recourse to feminine wiles, begging, tears, gestures that would acknowledge his gender and class superiority. It is, after all, what Armand and his father represent as social forces that destroys Marguerite.¹³

In contrast to the Duvals and the Baron de Varville, there is Gaston/Rex O'Malley, who is the most kind and least demanding of the film's major male characters. Presumably, Gaston is, like the Baron, an aristocrat; more importantly, he is Marguerite's friend. The film doesn't provide much information about the character's identity but he isn't presented as a playboy - nor is Gaston's interest in Marguerite sexual. There is nothing to suggest that the character is to be read as gay; yet, the fact that he isn't given a sexual definition allows for speculation. In any case, Gaston displays an innate dignity and emotional delicacy that separates him from the film's other male characters.

As for Marguerite's female acquaintances, the film divides these characters into two groups. Despite their

bickering and rivalries, Prudence/Laura Hope Crews and Olympe/Lenore Ulric are united in that they are both willing to exploit whoever they can. Although they are vulgar and insensitive, they are shrewd when it comes to business; in essence, the two women can be seen as aspiring to be worthy of the class that exploits them. In contrast, Marguerite has lost (if she ever had any) all interest in monetary gain. In the other grouping there is Marguerite's friend from her early laundry labouring days in Paris, Nichette/Elizabeth Allan, and the faithful servant, Nanine/Jessie Ralph; in contrast, these relations are presented as positive. With the young and idealistic Nichette, Marguerite has a friendship that is based on affection and mutual concern and, even more so, the affection is evident in the relation between Marguerite and Nanine. In both instances, the relationship contains a maternal component as the older woman concerns herself with the younger woman's welfare; and, unlike the superficial friendship Prudence offers Marguerite, these relations are genuine examples of female bonding. By making the above distinctions, I am not suggesting that the film intends to construct these female characters expressly along class lines. Although Marguerite, Nanine and Nichette are connected directly to their lower-class origins, these characters aren't the working class and none of the film's characters are typical representations of the proletariat.

Arguably, *Camille* is the culmination of Garbo's 30s films that are centred on the concept of romantic love. As in *Mata Hari*, *Camille's* narrative trajectory leads to her death; in *Mata Hari*, the death has a certain heroic connotation but, in *Camille*, there isn't anything that provides the viewer with a similar compensation. While the film isn't conceived to provide a rigorous critique of romantic love, as is Mauro Bolognini's *The True Story of Camille* (1981), a heavy-handed attempt to strip Dumas' story of its romanticism and expose its class biases, it is much more than a celebration of Marguerite's self-sacrifice.

Camille, like *A Star Is Born*, is about death but it is also, as are so many Cukor films, about human life and its potentials. If, with *Camille*, Cukor doesn't extend Garbo's star image, he enables her to be at her most generous and expansive. *Camille* is an intelligent, progressive film that is capable of soliciting a strong emotional response from the viewer. That response isn't due to an appeal to the sentimental; rather, it resides in the creativity and humanity that Cukor and Garbo and their collaborators bring to the material and its concerns.

¹³ In Dumas' works, Marguerite's death is demanded given her identity and function within the narrative. *Camille* makes Marguerite aware of why she is a threat and must be eliminated; whereas, Dumas' conception, the character has no awareness of what she represents to the establishment.

For an insightful discussion of the heroine, death and the melodrama, see Andrew Britton, "Metaphor and Mimesis: *Madame de...*", *Movie*, No. 29/30, Summer 1983, pp. 91-107.

II

TWO-FACED WOMAN

CENSORSHIP AND CRITICAL RECEPTION: THE DESTRUCTION OF A GREAT COMEDY

Two-Faced Woman is the 'notorious' film in Cukor and Garbo's respective careers. Critics dealing with Cukor's oeuvre tend to gloss over the film while those writing on Garbo treat the film as an insult to both the actor and her public. The film's reputation as an embarrassment remains today, fifty-some years after its release; but then, few people have seen the film as it was originally conceived and shot. The version of *Two-Faced Woman* MGM premiered on December 31, 1941 isn't the film that Cukor and Garbo envisioned. As anyone familiar with *Two-Faced Woman* knows, the film in its original conception received a condemned rating from the National Legion of Decency and the work was altered by the studio to meet its objections. According to several sources including Patrick McGilligan's book, MGM initially previewed *Two-Faced Woman* in November 1941; the 'condemned' rating led, in turn, to New York's Archbishop Spellman, among others, publicly denouncing it.¹ MGM had two options - either it ignored the rating (a highly improbable solution given the influential power of the Legion and MGM's 'family' entertainment reputation), or it eliminated the 'offensive' material from the film. The objections were: an "immoral and un-Christian attitude toward marriage and its obligations; impudently suggestive scenes, dialogue and situation; suggestive costumes."² The crucial revision was the insertion of a short scene consisting of two brief shots of Larry Blake/Melvyn Douglas making a telephone call during the nightclub sequence, in which he learns that his wife Karin/Greta Garbo is impersonating a fictitious twin sister, Katrin, with the intention of making him and his mistress Griselda Vaughn/Constance Bennett look ridiculous. Larry's knowledge removes any question of his desiring Katrin and of infidelity. (Nonetheless, when *Two-Faced Woman* was released in December 1941, the Legion gave the film a B rating, "Morally Objectionable in Part for All".)

The inserted scene is highly significant on two accounts: not only do the shots make the ensuing narrative developments 'moral', but the scene also functions to empower the Douglas character, shifting the film's position from a commitment to Karin to a partial identification with her husband. While it was easy enough to integrate the scene into the film, it eventually produces coherency problems if there are no further changes; nevertheless, MGM must have felt initially that the scene was a satisfactory response to the Legion's objections as I have seen in two instances prints of the film that have no other alterations. In the late 80s, a Toronto revival cinema screened a 16mm print that included the Melvyn Douglas phone call but contained no changes to accommodate the

scene in the subsequent narrative; a few years later, a local television station screened a print identical to the one I had seen at the revival cinema. Having come to believe that this version featured the only alteration, I questioned why the critics in 1941 had found *Two-Faced Woman* such a disaster: the film, with the simple deletion of one scene which is in hindsight clearly inappropriate, is on numerous levels a remarkable work and in need of revaluation. My question was answered when I saw the version of *Two-Faced Woman* MGM released on home video; this is undoubtedly the version that was premiered in December 1941 and helps to explain why the critics were so negative.³ Like the previous version I had seen, the MGM video print contains the phone call but, in addition, reveals striking alterations in the five sequences that follow. The most significant revisions occur in the fourth sequence in which Larry intends to confront Karin with the prospect of their divorcing but without telling her about meeting Katrin and wanting to marry her.

In his book, McGilligan features a quotation from *Two-Faced Woman*'s producer Gottfried Reinhardt who says that "...there were "massive rewrites" and "massive retakes" and in the process the film was "completely butchered,"...⁴ on the other hand, McGilligan doesn't provide any precise documentation. Of the material I have read, Alexander Walker's *Garbo*⁵ offers the most detailed account of the changes. In *Garbo's* filmography, Walker, who had access to the MGM archives, provides the following information:

"Retakes for the additional scene, making it clear that Melvyn Douglas now realized that the 'twin' was his wife, were directed by Andrew Marton and Charles Dorian. Other changes were made in the editing so as to eliminate 'the attitude to marriage that the picture now carries.' Among the lines that disappeared were: 'How does my position affect your position?' - 'Because we're related'; 'You must have been born in the tropics'; 'Are you all things to all men?'; 'You international trollop!' The footage of 'the couch scene' was reduced; so was a shot of Garbo in a low-cut dress."⁶

¹ Patrick McGilligan, *George Cukor: A Double Life: A Biography of the Gentleman Director* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 165-167.

² *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³ During June, 1993, New York's Film Forum (The Moving Image, Inc., 209 West Houston Street, NY NY), held a month long, complete retrospective of Garbo's films. Unfortunately but predictably, the 35mm *Two-Faced Woman* print was the version premiered in December, 1941.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁵ Alexander Walker, *Garbo: A Portrait* (New York: MacMillan, 1980). Within the text itself, Walker doesn't offer much information on the film's conception and production. His brief critical commentary on the film is summarized with, "It is a clock-work sex comedy - i.e. a comedy in which no one ever has sex - about mistaken identities. Doris Day and Rock Hudson inherited its formula in the 1950s," pp. 160-161.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

A comparison of the 16mm television print of the film with the commercially distributed video version reveals that the changes Walker lists were indeed made. In the section below, I offer a fuller description of the alterations the studio performed. It is in the nightclub sequence that Garbo wears a low-cut dress; the deletion mentioned above must occur in this sequence, although I haven't been able to discern where. My account involves the five sequences that follow the nightclub sequence: the film's final sequence, which employs slapstick comedy with Larry, who doesn't know how to ski, in pursuit of Karin on skis, is identical in both versions.

1. Karin and Larry in Karin's hotel suite - after returning from the nightclub.

a) In the 'original' version, there are three reaction shots of Larry which reinforce his attraction to Karin. In the second and third shots he indicates annoyance and then jealousy as she takes telephone calls from her admirers, O.O. Miller/Roland Young and Dick Williams/Robert Sterling; in the revised version, these are replaced by four similarly staged reaction shots that indicate that Larry is amused by Karin's 'act'.

b) In the revised version, seven shots are cut from the couch scene; primarily, the cuts are made to censor Karin's provocative gesture of reclining on the couch with her legs swung up and over its back - in this pose, she responds to Larry's "I've got my position to consider" with "How does my position affect your position?", and then laughs playfully at the suggestiveness of her reply. The cuts also eliminate a telephone call from O.O. Miller who is asking Karin for a date and Larry's reaction as he becomes increasingly annoyed at the attention Karin is getting from other men. In the original, Karin's "Oh, I shock you, don't I?" is said in response to Larry's outburst over the encouragement she is giving her suitors ("You seem to hover between cradle snatching and the old man's home!") whereas in the revised version the line is said by Karin after she tells Larry her code is "I never take money from relatives, only strangers."

c) A two-shot is shortened to delete Karin's "Do you believe in the effect of climate on the morals?", to which Larry responds "You must have been born in the tropics."

2. Karin's bedroom - the following morning.

a) In the original version, the sequence contains two brief shots in which a genuinely serious-minded Larry is shown talking on the telephone to Karin. He begins by apologizing for his behavior the previous evening and then asks Karin to meet him alone at his suite at the hotel that evening. In the revised print, these two shots have been retaken and although they contain the same dialogue, Larry now laughs to himself as he feigns seriousness about his sentiments and desires.

3. Larry's apartment - that evening.

a) In the revised version, the sequence begins with a long shot in which Larry surveys the room and then pantomimes escorting Karin around; as the door bell rings, Larry is spraying perfume in the air to enhance the atmosphere; this shot doesn't exist in the original.

b) As Larry is about to pour Karin a glass of champagne, a close-up of Larry grinning to himself has been added to the revised version.

c) In the original, Larry says "Are you all things to all men?"; in its revised form, the line is dubbed over with Larry now saying "Are you really so heartless?"

d) In the original, Karin and Larry are seen in a long take two-shot in which he tells her of his intention to divorce Karin so that they can marry; in the revised print, the long take is cut to include a close-up of Larry looking somewhat cynical as he questions Karin as to whether or not she thinks Karin will give him a divorce.

4. Larry and Karin at the Idaho ski lodge.

This sequence contains the most extensive reworking, including a shot that involves Garbo who didn't participate in any of the previous revisions. In the original, the sequence is made up of fifty-five shots; the commercial video print has twenty-one shots and this sequence is about two minutes shorter.

a) Again, as in the other sequences, the revised version features Larry in one-shot retakes. In the original, as he watches Karin approach the lodge, he rehearses the speech he intends to give asking for a divorce; in the revised version, he simply smirks knowingly. Later, Larry, who is upstairs and can watch the unaware Karin in the living room area below, now sees her unpack the sheer negligee she wore as Karin.

b) In the living room, where Larry and Karin directly encounter one another, the dialogue exchange is initially the same in both versions, but the latter half is drastically altered: in the original, Larry becomes increasingly frustrated as Karin tells him that she's been having a good time with the other ski instructors. Larry eventually chides her for being too self-sufficient and detached. In the revised version, a confident Larry provokes Karin's anger by claiming that he spent his time in New York alone and when she tries to challenge him he forbids her to speak; the long take two-shot which concludes the sequence features a complete rewrite of the dialogue, placing Karin at a disadvantage.

5. Bedroom of the ski lodge - the following morning.

a) In the original, there are two close-up reaction shots of Larry who is first disturbed and then angered as he realizes Karin is Karin when he sees her painted toenails; in the revised version, Larry looks knowingly at the sleeping Karin - in this context, the close-up shot of Karin's painted toenails has no significance as the film has repeatedly confirmed that Larry has known about the impersonation from its inception.

b) In the revised version, a close-up shot of Karin smiling to herself in her sleep as she murmurs "Larry" has been cut. This shot followed Larry's reaction to the incriminating painted toenails.

In summary, the comparison between the two prints reveals that substantial changes were made to produce a version that satisfied the Legion of Decency: cuts - twenty-six shots; shortened shots - two; retakes of reaction shots featuring Larry - eight; additional shots of Larry which function to re-affirm his knowledge of Karin's

impersonation - four; dubbing - one shot; scene rewrite - one shot.⁷ Yet, contrary to Reinhardt's claim that the film was "completely butchered", *Two-Faced Woman* was more accurately drastically reshaped. In every instance, from Larry's telephone call scene onward, the changes were made to reinforce the fact that he is in control of himself and, in effect, Karin. Disregarding the disastrous consequences this has for the film's gender politics, *Two-Faced Woman* ceases to be engaging entertainment if the viewer accepts the proposition that Larry knows about the deception. Given the initial presentation of the central protagonists and their situation, the film's humour and charm depends on Karin's success in enacting her 'double' and confronting Larry.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Before examining *Two-Faced Woman* in detail, I want to relate it historically within a series of contexts: MGM's box-office concerns; Garbo's career; and perhaps the most important of all, the genre of the screwball comedy.

Obviously, MGM had no intention of making a film that challenged the prevailing moral codes; it seems surprising now that the work got to the production stage without encountering censorship problems, given the studio's policy of having their projects approved by the Production Code before filming began. Critics have suggested that *Two-Faced Woman*'s moral tone wasn't more or less lax than that of a number of other films released at the time; rather, the film was singled out by the Legion to remind the studios of its vigilance. This notion seems dubious as the Production Code was operating at full force in 1941. While the Legion wasn't intimately involved with the studios' preproduction processes, the industry was fully aware of the Legion's guidelines and the power the religious organization exerted nationwide. More likely it was a combination of the material and Garbo's eroticism that provoked the strong reaction. In any case, *Two-Faced Woman* was a troubled project from the outset. In Gene Phillips' book⁸, Cukor himself says that the script wasn't "really ready" when the film began shooting. McGilligan's book⁹ contains a statement from Reinhardt who says that he and Cukor fought over the script, shooting procedures and the director's casting of Constance Bennett and Ruth Gordon. McGilligan also refers to the well-known disagreement between Adrian and Cukor over Garbo's wardrobe with the latter insisting she wore clothing that reflected her off-screen dress style;¹⁰ and, both Garbo and Cukor were unhappy with MGM's decision to cast Melvyn Douglas in the romantic male lead role as they didn't think he was suitable for the part. As *Two-Faced Woman* reveals, Garbo and Cukor were right. Douglas' performance is a great liability. His attempt at verbal and physical comedy are, respectively, strained and heavy-handed and there is nothing romantic about him. Furthermore, Garbo had mixed feelings about the project and was disappointed at not having William Daniels to photograph her.

As has been well-documented elsewhere, Garbo's career became increasingly problematized as the 30s wore on. *Camille* was a critical and financial success but her following film, *Conquest*, an expensively mounted historical romance, was a box-office failure. MGM began thinking that the public had grown tired of Garbo's melodramas and decided to cast her in a romantic comedy; *Ninotchka* was tailored to play off her popular image and was a huge success critically, making it feasible that Garbo should do another comedy. As Andrew Britton mentions in his Katharine Hepburn book,¹¹ *Ninotchka* was released in 1939 the same year Dietrich appeared in *Destry Rides Again*, a comedy Western intended expressly to make Dietrich a more accessible presence. By the late 30s, Garbo's persona, like Dietrich's, was considered too rarified; both actors embodied an eroticism and 'European' sensibility that was no longer commercial. America was becoming pre-occupied with notions of Americanness as the political situation in Europe worsened. And, as Britton argues in regard to Hepburn, Garbo and Dietrich, their images needed to be modified if they were to fit into the 40s cinema; in each instance, the project was to make the actor's image more 'democratic', more the 'typical' woman.¹²

⁷ There are a number of stills from the film in circulation containing images that aren't in either of the versions I am discussing. These stills could have been photographed in conjunction with scenes Cukor shot or from scenes that were shot after the studio withdrew the film in November 1941. In *George Cukor, A Double Life*, McGilligan says Cukor wasn't involved on any level in the reworking of the film. *Op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁸ Gene D. Phillips, *George Cukor* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), p. 99.

⁹ McGilligan, *Op. cit.*, p. 166.

¹⁰ The issue of Garbo's wardrobe was no small matter. *Two-Faced Woman* and Garbo's retirement have been placed within the context of Adrian's statement that he left MGM/the Hollywood cinema upon completing the film because Garbo was no longer to be dressed glamorously and, hence, an era had ended.

Discussing Adrian's MGM career, W. Robert LaVine says of the Adrian/Cukor conflict: 'He [Adrian] provided her [Garbo] with twenty-eight beautiful ensembles, all of which Cukor refused to accept, insisting that the designs be simplified to have an "off the rack" look. Mayer had decided (with Cukor's support) that Garbo's image had to become more "ordinary,".... He goes on to say that Adrian "grudgingly complied" with Cukor's wishes regarding Garbo's wardrobe. *In a Glamorous Fashion: The Fabulous Years of Hollywood Costume Design* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), pp. 54-55.

Judging from LaVine's remarks, Adrian seemed to be treating the production as a star vehicle whereas Cukor (and Mayer) were concerned with characterization and verisimilitude.

¹¹ Andrew Britton, *Katharine Hepburn: the Thirties and After* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Tyneside Cinema, 1984), p. 70.

¹² Hedy Lamarr undergoes this 'Americanization' process in *Come Live With Me* (1941). As with Dietrich in *Destry Rides Again* and Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story*, Lamarr's co-star is Jimmy Stewart and it is through her involvement with the 'average' Stewart that Lamarr learns to rethink her identity and values.

As I will discuss, while *Ninotchka* repackaged Garbo's image, the film didn't solve the studio's financial concerns regarding her box-office value. Garbo's popularity was strongest abroad and as the European market dwindled, MGM was placed in the position of needing to tailor Garbo's appeal specifically to its domestic market. *Two-Faced Woman* was chosen as the vehicle to give to the American public an 'accessible' Garbo. Previous to the film's release, MGM launched a huge campaign to announce that a 'new' Garbo was to be seen in *Two-Faced Woman*, a contemporary romantic comedy.¹³ *Two-Faced Woman* was the first Garbo film since *Anna Christie* to have a modern setting and take place in America solely; and, the film's publicity promised that Garbo would be "Daring! As a Modern Glamour Girl!"¹⁴ The campaign to re-design Garbo's image wasn't lost on the critics; ever since the film's release, they have reinforced the notion that the film presented Garbo as Hollywood's version of the American 'glamour girl'. In actuality, *Two-Faced Woman* doesn't make any attempt to mould Garbo into such an image; Garbo's Karin is the antithesis of the image and her Katrin, who says she has arrived in New York from Europe, is in the tradition of Old World sophistication and doesn't evoke the like of a Lana Turner, an Ann Sheridan, a Rita Hayworth.¹⁵

Aside from distorting Garbo's glamour image in the film itself, critics panning *Two-Faced Woman* often say that the film might have worked if Garbo's role had been played by a light comic actor such as Carole Lombard or Rosalind Russell.¹⁶ Yet, Garbo, even in the revised version of the film, proves herself to be exceedingly adept; her line readings do justice to the script's wry humour but without forcing the material to yield more than was intended, and her timing is very precise. It is Garbo who primarily sustains a series of set pieces that at times demand both verbal and physical comedy skills - the entire nightclub sequence including Karin's discovery that she can rhumba is beautifully played. Garbo provides the viewer with the delightful experience of watching simultaneously Karin's spontaneous interaction with Larry and his friends and Karin's reaction to herself and her daring behaviour. And, Katrin's seduction of Larry when visiting his apartment is played by Garbo with a slightly exaggerated, theatrical flair; she undercuts the 'romantic' connotations of the rendezvous without reducing their meeting to a farcical encounter.

Two-Faced Woman could have been a vehicle for a performer like Lombard but Garbo brings more to the film than a highly assured comic performance. Most likely, a Lombard or a Russell, in the tradition of their training as comedienne, would have played the role more broadly and with greater aggressiveness; in turn, the result would have been a less intimate characterization making light of the painfulness of the situation. As always, Garbo greatly humanizes her interpretation. In the ski lodge sequences that bracket Karin's trip to New York, Garbo makes the character a thoughtful and intelligent person who is disappointed, angered and hurt by her husband's behaviour.

¹³ Garbo had been associated strongly with the melodrama and the historical romance genres which in such areas as subject matter, setting, characterization tend to call attention to artifice and stylization. In contrast, *Two-Faced Woman*, a contemporary comedy, suggested a greater cultural assimilation - though obviously, like other genre films, Hollywood comedy films are stylized employing conventions and the films are inscribed within the dominant ideological cultural and social codes.

¹⁴ Walker, *Op. cit.*, p. 156.

The description comes from an MGM promotion sheet sent to theatrical exhibitors.

¹⁵ Possibly, because of the emphasis which had been placed on the studio's need to make Garbo accessible to the American public, many critics discussing the film implicitly or explicitly say MGM was crass and insensitive to put Garbo in *Two-Faced Woman*. But it seems highly improbable that the studio was indifferent about Garbo and her future. In addition to having had a long-term investment in her, the studio was aware that Garbo's international status as a major star remained intact. There is no reason to think MGM didn't give serious consideration to what it was attempting to do with Garbo's career in casting her in the film. In the writings I have read on the film, there has been little interest in censorship practices and how these demands could damage a film; instead, *Two-Faced Woman* tends to serve the purpose of providing a means to attack the Hollywood studio system and/or its director.

¹⁶ In *Star Acting* Charles Affron, who offers a generally intelligent discussion of Garbo's screen persona and performance techniques, refuses even to consider seriously *Two-Faced Woman* and her performance. Affron dismisses the film because he can't conceive of Garbo playing the type of comedy the film demands of her.

In discussing star images and presences in this project, I haven't addressed theories of acting and film. My concern with the star is primarily restricted to his or her relation to or embodiment of social and cultural values and the ideological issues these values raise. Clearly, there are connections between what a particular star image conveys to the viewer in terms of the culture and the acting or performance mode the star employs - an obvious example would be the method actor. Nevertheless, a star's identity is most often defined by such factors as sex appeal, gender traits, age, race, ethnicity; and then there are the filmic elements - direction, mise-en-scene, editing - which contribute to the construction of image and acting style. Additionally, film has incorporated performance modes from other media, including the Broadway theatre, radio and, more recently, television.

At present, the writing done on film acting tends to remain on the level of recognizing a broad division in techniques - the naturalists (Stanislavsky) and the anti-naturalists (Brecht). James Naremore's *Acting in the Cinema* and Jeremy G. Butler's *Star Texts* feature introductions which establish and at best slightly embellish this division which originates with theatrical acting. Perhaps film acting can't be theorized beyond a very basic level given its heterogeneous nature. It may be more productive to explore the diversity of approaches than to try to produce an all-encompassing theory of what constitutes screen acting. I have found that the most stimulating and insightful work done on acting has come from the analysis of the individual star image and personas.

Garbo's approach to the film's text and generic demands isn't conventional and, therefore, her performance doesn't fulfil preconceived critical expectations; the performance is not only highly accomplished, it is also highly original.

In a brief discussion of the film in the Lambert book,¹⁷ Cukor says, "Usually, when you make a picture that doesn't turn out well, it's soon happily buried. Except, of course, that television keeps popping up and you may be confronted with your past failures. The funny thing about *Two-Faced Woman* is that because of Garbo it also appears at film festivals. People tell me, 'It's very interesting.' Well, I think it's lousy! The script was bad—not funny. We all knocked ourselves out, but it just wasn't funny. That's the whole story." Cukor's harsh dismissal of the film needs to be placed in a perspective that takes into account the weight of the negative response to the film since it premiered in December 1941. In addition to the production problems Cukor encountered, the condemned rating and the burden that has been put upon this film in the trajectory of Garbo's career, the film Cukor most likely remembers is the version MGM constructed to get the film a B rating from the Legion of Decency. Given his emphasis on the written word and the screenwriters' contribution, Cukor wouldn't have committed himself to the project if he thought the script was thoroughly 'bad'; as he says in other instances,¹⁸ he felt the film's script wasn't sufficiently worked through when the production began. Clearly, the film lacks a satisfactory conclusion but, then, it seems impossible to produce a resolution that would leave Larry and Karin in a mutually satisfying relationship. The slapstick skiing scenes which lead up to the reunion of the couple are completely unfunny and cannot mask a desperate attempt to provide the narrative with a happy ending. As for Cukor saying that the film isn't funny, this is more or less the case with the revised version, the alterations turning the comedy sour and unpleasant with their imposition of a smug male superiority.

TWO-FACED WOMAN AND THE SCREWBALL COMEDY

Two-Faced Woman belongs to the cycle of screwball comedies produced roughly from the mid-30s to the early 40s: films that inflect the tradition of romantic comedy toward farce and slapstick, a development uniquely American. A leading tendency of 'screwball' was the anarchic overturning of conventional values: as in such classic screwball comedies as *Theodora Goes Wild* and *Bringing Up Baby*. *Two-Faced Woman* empowers its female protagonist at the expense of the male ego. The film was scripted by S.N. Behrman, Salka Viertel and George Oppenheimer, the screenplay being based on a play by Ludwig Fulda which had been filmed in 1925 as *Her Sister From Paris* starring Constance Talmadge and Ronald Colman.¹⁹ The silent screen version is usually mentioned

to indicate that the Garbo film was based on material considered passé by 1941 standards. But, on the contrary, the film's presentation of heterosexual relations is in tune with contemporary works dealing expressly with sexual politics. What is significant about the film's original source material is that it places *Two-Faced Woman*'s origins in the pre-Code era, when it was still possible to deal openly with adultery.

Two-Faced Woman has, in fact, strong thematic similarities to *The Awful Truth*; like the Cukor-Garbo film, *The Awful Truth* is concerned with the inequality existing between the sexes, male presumption and ego, the issue of female identity in our patriarchal culture. In both narratives, the husband is implicated early on as engaging in extramarital relations and, eventually, the wife resorts to impersonation in an attempt to get him back. But the films differ in their approaches and these differences centrally involve the presences of the film's respective directors and stars. In *The Awful Truth*, the Irene Dunne and Cary Grant characters are given a fairly equal standing and, although the film is critical of Grant's behaviour, it doesn't privilege Dunne's position. In contrast, *Two-Faced Woman* has a strong commitment to the Garbo character and at best a slight degree of sympathy for the fool the Douglas character makes of himself. McCarey places greater weight on the concept of the couple whereas Cukor, as he frequently does, displays a special concern for his female character and her situation. As for the two films' stars, Dunne, who developed her reputation as a light comedienne in the latter part of the 30s, doesn't project (and isn't asked to) the emotional intimacy or the combination of vulnerability and self-assuredness that Garbo brings to her role. With Grant, as Andrew Britton persuasively argues,²⁰ *The Awful Truth* is about the chastisement of the actor's character because of his "male presumption and opportunism"; and, the film, like Cukor's *Holiday* and Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby*, is concerned with the eradication of "...the differential of social/sexual power within the heterosexual couple, and use(s) Grant to formulate a type of masculinity which is valuable and attractive by virtue of the sharing of gender characteristics with women." Clearly, the film's political project and its production of meaning (at least in the reading Britton offers) depend in great part on the contribution of Grant's persona and presence. In *Two-Faced Woman* Garbo's assertive, even aggressive presence, Cukor's bias towards the female position, and the casting of Melvyn Douglas, conspire to render such equalizing impossible.

¹⁷ Gavin Lambert, *On Cukor* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), p. 156.

¹⁸ Phillips, *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

¹⁹ John Bainbridge, *Garbo* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1955), p. 213.

²⁰ Andrew Britton, "Cary Grant: Comedy and Male Desire", *CineAction!*, No. 7, Winter 1986-87, pp. 36-51.

Hitchcock's *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* can be seen as a variant on McCarey's comedy, intending to deal humorously with the constraints the marriage bond imposes on the couple. Hitchcock allegedly agreed to direct the film because of his friendship with Carole Lombard; but whatever his reasons, the film, which was based on an original screenplay by Norman Krasna, lacks a generous spirit towards its protagonists, with neither the Carole Lombard nor Robert Montgomery character having any genuine appeal. The film, like *The Awful Truth*, moves to a resolution which hinges on the husband's willingness to amend his attitude towards his wife and their relationship. Throughout *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* Montgomery behaves in a petulant manner; at the film's conclusion, Lombard goads Montgomery into being a hero, a 'real' man who punches out his prissy rival, Gene Raymond, and then physically constrains Lombard and makes her submit to his desire. While Hitchcock may have found Lombard a funny person, the film predominantly utilizes the most grating aspects of her persona, encouraging her to be childish, shrill and self-centred. As a team, Lombard and Montgomery can't accomplish what she and John Barrymore do in Hawks' screwball comedy *Twentieth Century* which, possibly, was Hitchcock's aim in having the couple continuously assault each other in a 'playful' manner. The film's humour depends too single-mindedly on sadistic impulses to be enjoyable as the lightweight comedy it was supposedly intended to be. The 'comedy of remarriage' formula can operate both positively and negatively: Hitchcock's apparent contempt for *both* his protagonists is worlds removed from Cukor's uncompromising commitment to the Garbo character.

TWO-FACED WOMAN AND THE LADY EVE

Released in the same year as *Two-Faced Woman*, Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve* is a highly successful and satisfying film that has close parallels to the Cukor-Garbo project. In a short but provocative piece on *The Lady Eve*,²¹ Robin Wood make connections between the Cukor and Sturges films but he also suggests that the 'thematic complex' structuring these two comedies "transcends authorial and generic boundaries and is deeply rooted in the sexual politics of our culture." To make his point concerning the latter, he produces a comparison/contrast of the Sturges film and Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Wood contends that the works share thematic concerns ('the problem of female identity within a patriarchal culture' and 'the relationship between romantic love and the male ego') and a plot device (the heroine constructs an alternative identity projecting a romantic and/or erotically fascinating image); but the two films, Wood argues, take inverse approaches, with the Sturges film aligned to the woman's viewpoint and culminating in the defeat of male egoism while the Hitchcock film privileges (while ultimately undermining) the male viewpoint and ends with the destruction of the heroine.

Two-Faced Woman and *The Lady Eve* share a central male protagonist who wants to possess the 'unobtainable' woman to flatter his ego but there is a substantial difference in the character-type/actor in each film. In the Cukor film, Larry Blake is urbane and has had a lot of experience in dealing with women, a character representative of Douglas' screen persona at this point in his career. While the character's situation and his reactions to it are intended to provide humour, the viewer isn't encouraged to find Blake amusing or even likeable. In contrast, Henry Fonda in the Sturges film is playing a young man who is very naive about women and, clearly, Sturges and Fonda are having fun with the actor's screen persona and popular image. Whereas Fonda's sincerity, innocence and naiveté usually help to define his 'heroic' identity, these qualities become in *The Lady Eve* a source of humour. Employing his considerable comedy skills, Fonda and the character he plays are genuinely funny and, as the character is suitably chastised by the heroine for his presumptuous notions regarding gender and class superiority, the film's resolution with Fonda and Barbara Stanwyck together is gratifying.

The Lady Eve is aligned predominantly with Stanwyck's Jean who is intelligent, sexual and funny; but Sturges doesn't respond to Stanwyck or her character with the concern, nuance and sensitivity that Cukor brings to his presentation of Garbo in *Two-Faced Woman*. As with Fonda, Sturges tends to employ Stanwyck as an archetypal American figure - the tough, sexy, wise-cracking woman who becomes, when she falls in love, vulnerable. While *The Lady Eve* criticizes Fonda because he is incapable of trusting either his feelings or Stanwyck when he initially falls in love with her, the character is in equal measure criticized for class consciousness. In her masquerade as 'The Lady Eve', Stanwyck is avenging herself on grounds of both gender and class; her crowning moment occurs on the honeymoon when she confesses in a genteel lady-like manner that she is a nymphomaniac whose conquests include the stable groom. In contrast, in the Cukor film, class status isn't a narrative factor although, arguably, the class issue is displaced onto Karin's 'foreigner' identity. In her thinking and behaviour Karin (and Katrin) isn't representative of the upper-middle-class American woman. Also, the woman's impersonation functions differently in each film: a) in the Sturges film, the impersonation has a single function which is revenge; b) in *Two-Faced Woman*, Garbo's Karin initially intends to use the fictitious twin sister she constructs as a means to make Larry see how ridiculous the 'worldly' type of woman is. In tone and attitude the two films are very dissimilar, and the Sturges film is more assertive and confident in dealing with the ideological issues its narrative raises. In *The Lady Eve*, the lead characters/actors are well-matched, complementing each other, and the film doesn't depart appreciably from the comedy genre and its conventions.

²¹ Robin Wood, *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers - I*, Second Edition, editor Nicholas Thomas (Chicago and London: St. James Press, 1990), pp. 487-488.

TWO-FACED WOMAN AND NINOTCHKA

With *Ninotchka* a great critical success, it is not surprising that aspects of the film are found in Garbo's follow-up project. In regard to plot devices, in both films Garbo has a rival for Douglas' affection, a woman who is very feminine and sophisticated and belongs to the milieu that the Douglas character inhabits. In *Ninotchka*, the Grand Duchess Swana/Ina Claire, is more than a rival as she becomes, eventually, the film's villain; on the narrative level, the character's villainy consists of using dishonest means to get Ninotchka to go back to Russia but, from a sexual-political perspective, the Duchess becomes a villain because she attempts to gain control/ownership over Douglas' Leon. The treatment of the Duchess is manipulative and unpleasant but, implicitly, the film justifies its presentation on the grounds that she is a White Russian and refuses to abandon herself to the 'democratic' spirit Paris represents. By featuring a matronly Ina Claire in the role, the film encourages the viewer to think of the character and her desires as somewhat distasteful - she is, after all, pursuing and bargaining for the affections of a man noticeably younger than herself. In comparison, *Two-Faced Woman*'s treatment of the Constance Bennett character is much more generous; the film doesn't seek to discredit the character because of her desires and it isn't misogynistic in its use of Bennett as Garbo's rival.

In *Ninotchka*, Garbo projects two images - there is Ninotchka the Russian agent who is serious-minded, unemotional, authoritative, a woman who behaves in a masculine manner, and there is the Ninotchka who, upon falling in love and letting herself succumb to capitalism/democracy, blossoms into a 'feminine' woman. (The former Garbo image is somewhat akin to the Karin *Two-Faced Woman* introduces. She, like Ninotchka, has no vices.) *Ninotchka* was conceived in part as a conscious attempt to gently satirize Garbo's screen persona; in the film, the star whose image has been built on an identification with romance is entirely devoid of 'romantic' impulses. Although *Ninotchka* offered a 'different' Garbo to the public in having her play comedy, the film's splitting of Garbo's persona through characterization into a masculine and feminine sphere had been well-established, particularly in *Queen Christina*. There, Garbo impersonates a man and, in effect, the same could more or less be said of her disciplinarian Russian agent; more generally, there are several Garbo films in which she performs a masquerade, *The Mysterious Lady*, *Mata Hari*, *As You Desire Me*. In these films the Garbo character invariably moves from the masculine persona to a more feminine image and the transformation occurs because she has fallen in love with a man. The project of having the Garbo character accept and embrace her femininity is at its most explicit in *Queen Christina* and *Ninotchka*; the two films are not without contradiction or complexity regarding Garbo's gender or sex orientation but the predominant concern seems to be to celebrate Garbo's full discovery of the feminine through a heterosexual relationship. Both films, without doubt,

are primarily interested in sexual politics despite their ostensible dealings with history and social systems. Arguably, *Ninotchka* is the more arch regarding Garbo's screen persona and gender concerns: on the one hand, the film wants to be taken as being satirical about its star's persona and gender traits; on the other, it wants to treat the gender transformation Ninotchka undergoes as a 'natural' aspect of the character the star is playing. *Ninotchka*, perhaps even more than *Queen Christina*, compromises Garbo by having her acquiesce totally in what the Douglas character ideologically embodies; Cukor, in both the films they made together, never compromises the character's integrity.

TWO-FACED WOMAN: THE VINDICATION

(Reference throughout is to the original version.)

As I have said, the origin of *Two-Faced Woman* is a play and the film neatly divides into three acts or movements: 1) a ski lodge in Idaho where Larry Blake and Karin Borg meet and marry; 2) a New York nightclub and hotel setting in which Karin, pretending to be her twin sister, seduces Larry who decides he's in love with his wife's sister; and 3) the initial Idaho ski lodge with Larry returning to tell Karin that he wants a divorce. That the film retains a three act structure isn't to say that *Two-Faced Woman* is stagy; like numerous other Cukor films adapted from stage plays, the film's mise-en-scène is elegant with several long takes featuring Garbo and Douglas, the editing is fluid and the actors' performances are scaled down to the more intimate medium of the cinema. Employing a convention of the romantic comedy, the film presents the relationship between Larry and Karin as based on the attraction of opposite identities. In this context, it is more difficult to see why Karin falls in love with Larry. Garbo's Karin is presented as a very disciplined ski instructor (she informs Larry that she doesn't smoke, drink or dance) who is totally committed to her profession and a life that privileges personal freedom; as such, she is more aligned to the Hollywood archetype of the male wanderer than the female adventuress. Karin is identified with the sports world (in addition to skiing, she is seen swimming); in the film's introductory sequence, she is dressed in skiing garb - pants, a sweater and a cap with a sun shield. When asked about her living circumstances, Karin says that she lives in a trailer and travels around the countryside. In contrast, Larry can't ski and appears to have no interest in the nomadic life. Larry is associated with the East, he is a New Yorker who publishes a widely read financial magazine, and the inference is that he leads a very active social life. Leaving aside the unlikely possibility that Karin finds Larry irresistibly attractive and/or totally disarming, the reason(s) she marries Larry may have to do with her perception of his potential to be a person of intellectual and creative worth.²² While Larry is seen initially as encouraging this notion, he soon reveals his true nature. His attitude towards the magazine is summed up in "There's no



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sex appeal in statistics"; and, later, Larry attempts to intimidate Karin with "Over three million people read my magazine weekly and I decide its policy." It is clear that Larry's interest in the magazine has nothing to do with 'intellectual and creative worth' and everything to do with masculinist power. If the film is somewhat evasive about Karin's reasons for marrying Larry, it is direct about what motivates Larry's behaviour. Noticing Karin's physical attractiveness, Larry, initiating a meeting with her, finds her a challenge and his ego isn't satisfied until she has been won.

Karin and Larry's relationship and the marriage itself are tested in their first night at the ski lodge. When Larry is met by his business partner O.O. Miller and secretary Ruth Ellis/Ruth Gordon, who have come to the lodge assuming Larry has been lost while skiing, he quickly rekindles an enthusiasm for his high-powered job. In confronting Karin with the news that they are returning to New York, Larry is forced into admitting that he isn't really very interested in her ideas on how to live life rewardingly. Furthermore, he becomes belligerent when she refuses to agree to his decisions; Larry tells Karin that his plans are important and hers are not. In these scenes, Larry is defined through his egoism, masculine presumption and perception of Karin as a decorative object he has acquired. Whereas Larry has been insincere, manipulative and deceitful, Karin has entered the marriage with openness and honesty. With Karin, Garbo plays a character who strongly utilizes aspects of her screen persona traditionally associated with the male gender - she is direct, principled, strong-willed and intelligent. While Karin and Ninotchka share these traits, in *Two-Faced Woman* Garbo and Karin aren't meant to be taken as a source of humour. And, indeed, unlike Douglas' Leon in *Ninotchka*, his Larry doesn't find Karin's self-assertion and determination amusing.

In numerous accounts of the film, it is claimed that Garbo poses as her twin sister to win back Douglas who has lost interest in her. Such a description of the film's premise is misleading. Larry doesn't abandon Karin because he no longer desires her; rather, he leaves Karin when she challenges his authority and refuses to relinquish her independence and identity to satisfy his wants. *Two-Faced Woman* isn't a romantic comedy concerned with sexual intrigues and innuendo. The central concern of the film is political in nature with Karin insisting on there being equality within the relationship. The conflict between the two protagonists, its intensity and the weight of Garbo's presence tend to give the film a dramatic forcefulness that is unexpected and disturbing.

The film's second act, with Karin going to New York in an attempt to indicate to Larry that she is still committed to the relationship and desires him, begins with her discovery that Larry and Griselda are back together. Karin's initial response is to flee but, through an unanticipated encounter with O.O. Miller who is told by Ruth Ellis that he has seen Karin's twin sister, she decides to stay on to confront Larry and challenge Griselda with

Karin. Karin is very stylish and quite blunt about sexual desires and her willingness to be kept by wealthy men. With Karin's appearance, *Two-Faced Woman* initiates a delightful comic adventure. Given the way Larry has behaved, it is essential that Karin fight back. She undermines Larry's self-confidence (when he approaches the table, she 'mistakes' him for a waiter) and then exploits his masculine anxieties and competitive nature, blatantly encouraging the attentions of Dick Williams and O.O. Miller. Karin, in taking total control of their encounter, disempowers Larry and by the conclusion of the nightclub sequence, she has managed also to eliminate Griselda as a rival.

In playing Karin, Karin, as conceived by Garbo, never disappears; the viewer remains conscious of Karin and what she wants and is achieving. Karin is glamorous, sensual, witty and has a sense of humour about her situation; Karin becomes aware that she possesses these qualities (after the impersonation has been exposed, Karin tells Larry that there is lot of Karin in her). Cukor and Garbo make Karin into a person who is in the process of discovering and exploring her potentials. Karin's impersonation is a creative act and in *Two-Faced Woman*, as in many Cukor films, performing becomes the means by which a woman realizes aspects of her identity, finds pleasure and gratification.

The high point of Garbo's performance occurs in the rendezvous in Larry's apartment. In contrast to her behaviour in the two previous encounters, Karin is more relaxed and assured by now, taking a somewhat ironic stance towards Larry's ardor. Garbo has Karin slightly mock the 'siren' that Karin is supposed to be and is in Larry's eyes; on the other hand, she isn't creating a parody which would reduce the characters to stereotypes and coarsen her presence and performance. Garbo doesn't dis-

22 There are several Garbo films including *Susan Lenox* and *Grand Hotel* in which she plays a woman who falls in love with a man because of the admirable character traits she perceives in his nature. Whether or not the potential is realized, the Garbo character remains committed to the man. The thematic is bound to a strong belief in human goodness. In *Conquest*, the Garbo film which most fully utilizes this thematic, Marie Walewska/Garbo succumbs to Napoleon/Charles Boyer precisely when he tells her of his vision of a unified and peaceful Europe. (The pattern is inverted in *The Painted Veil* in which Garbo cannot see until it is almost too late that the Herbert Marshall character is the embodiment of humanistic impulses.) Having a woman perceive the worthy qualities in a highly flawed man is also a premise of a number of Cukor films, most notably *A Star Is Born*.

In regard to Garbo's screen persona and Dietrich's, it is difficult to imagine a Dietrich film in which she would accept the notion that a man embodies 'ideals' and that she could commit herself to such a character. It is, perhaps, not surprising that Cukor and Dietrich didn't collaborate as their sensibilities are strikingly dissimilar in certain areas. Obviously, Garbo and Cukor aren't celebrating a man's vision; rather, their concern is a perception of human potentials - and, with a few exceptions, in Cukor's films the perception and a full understanding of what is at stake is attributed to a female character.

tance herself from the proceedings to indicate to the viewer that she, too, enjoys the 'joke'. Some critics have claimed that Garbo uses Katrin to send up the kind of characters she played in 20s and 30s dramatic films, but such a notion stems from the perception that *Two-Faced Woman* is a crude and cynical film. It is possible, of course, to find connections between Katrin and previous Garbo characterizations. For instance, *As You Desire Me*, a film which features Melvyn Douglas as her leading man and has Garbo playing a woman who may or may not be impersonating Douglas' long lost wife, has a scene in which Garbo, in an erotic gesture, lights her cigarette from Douglas' already lit one. Katrin uses the same cigarette-lighting technique in her seduction; in *Two-Faced Woman*, the gesture is intended to be satirizing Larry and his sexual passion.

Two-Faced Woman is very much concerned with Karin, her identity and the effects that the impersonation has upon her. Obviously, Karin doesn't want to become Katrin, a female image bound up with male fantasy - woman as inaccessible, mysterious and sexuality incarnate. Yet, in enacting Katrin, Karin discovers, as she informs Ruth Ellis, aspects of herself that both surprise and delight her. Unlike previous Garbo films which have had her move from a masculine identity to a more feminine image, *Two-Faced Woman* doesn't privilege the feminine woman. Instead, the film suggests that Garbo's Karin has come to the realization that the masculine and the feminine co-exist within her. As the film's concluding sequences illustrate, Karin will not be Katrin to please Larry; if what Karin embodies gives her pleasure, it isn't bound to her objectification.

While *Two-Faced Woman* takes as its project the development of a woman's identity through performance and play, the film can be read simultaneously as a critique of masculinist behaviour and its limitations. Douglas' Larry doesn't evolve as a person; the character is without a sense of humour, particularly when the joke is on him. When he finally discovers Karin's impersonation, Larry is incapable of either seeing the humour in the situation or admitting gracefully to his defeat. Instead, he does his best to antagonize Karin through belittling her identity and potential to be an erotic and desirable woman; although Larry supposedly is jesting in his refusal to acknowledge Karin's claim that she was Katrin, the response is mean-minded and sadistic rather than humorous. Interestingly, the film twice raises the possibility that Larry has his own 'twin' - in the initial ski lodge sequence, Karin tells him that he is two people - Napoleon and a poetic young man; in the film's final shots, Larry tells Karin, after she helps him out of the pond he has fallen into, that she has rescued his twin brother, Lawrence, the name Katrin gave him. As he is presented, there is no sense that Larry has the imagination to do what Karin has done in constructing her twin sister. Larry's thinking doesn't seem to extend beyond his producing rationalizations to justify his self-gratifying behaviour: Karin is too self-sufficient to need him or care genuinely about their

relationship; Katrin needs his protection and guidance. And, as for Larry's relationship with Griselda, she understands perfectly what he wants - she flatters his ego, and tries to gratify his fantasies and sooth his anxieties.

Bennett's Griselda represents a third image of 'woman', compared implicitly with Karin/Katrin. She thinks of herself as being a 'modern' woman: she has a career as a highly successful playwright and appears to be independent. While she prides herself on being in control of her emotions and any situations she encounters, she is seen letting out a hysterical shriek secretly whenever she is angered. And, more significantly, Griselda claims to be honest about what she is doing, telling Karin that men like to 'see the wheels going round'; yet, Karin overhears her manipulating Larry into coming to the Boston tryout of her play by telling him that she depends on his authoritative presence. By suppressing her feelings and motives, Griselda is in a sense giving a performance but, unlike Karin, hers carries negative connotations. *Two-Faced Woman* doesn't exploit the notion of women as rivals by having the two women trading insults; ultimately, what is at stake between Karin and Griselda is a moral issue - as Karin/Katrin says in response to Griselda's question "What kind of a woman are you, anyway?"²³ "Honest." Constance Bennett's presence and persona suggest a very American notion of sophistication and, as such, contrast nicely with Garbo's European sensibility.

Although a secondary character, Ruth Ellis deserves mention as she can be seen as a counterpoint to what Griselda represents. Ruth Ellis and Karin quickly become friends when they meet again on Karin's visit to New York. And, just as Cukor doesn't have Bennett play Griselda as a caricature, Gordon's Miss Ellis isn't the clichéd wise-cracking, lovelorn, self-deprecating 'Girl Friday' secretary. Karin is open with Ruth Ellis about her feelings and marital situation and the latter lends her support to Karin's plans regarding Larry and his infidelity. She is warm, contemplative and sincere and it is highly understandable why Karin likes her.

In the film's third act/movement, Karin and Larry reunite, separate and finally, in the closing shots, reunite. The prolonged skiing sequence seems to be an attempt to distract the viewer from thinking about the impossibility of the film having a romantic ending that carries conviction. In addition to having the first and third act taking place in the same location, the emphasis on symmetry is reinforced by having Karin and Larry wearing the same outfits and the skiing outings ending similarly: in the initial instance, Larry is seen buried in snow, only his skis visible; in the second outing, Larry, in an attempt to reach Karin to make-up, loses control and is stopped by inadvertently skiing into a pond. The first skiing disaster is followed with the news that Karin and Larry are married; the

²³In Garbo, op. cit., p. 187, Walker lists the many titles for the film that were considered before *Two-Faced Woman* was chosen. The title's irony is delightful - if there is one thing Garbo/Karin isn't, it is a 'two-faced' woman.



second leads to their reconciliation and the film's fade-out. While the symmetry suggests resolution, the film hasn't moved to a point where the two characters exist as equals in the relationship. In having Larry in the last shot identify her alternately as Karin and Katrin there is the suggestion that he accepts her integrated persona; yet, nothing has indicated that Larry is actually willing to acknowledge Karin's intelligence, integrity, courage. Is Larry's disastrous experience on skis a sufficient assault on his dignity to be taken as his chastisement? Is Larry any less unpleasant by the film's conclusion?

Two-Faced Woman is unsuccessful in resolving its narrative concerns but, arguably, the film shouldn't be dismissed as a failure here. Having an ending as awkward, unsatisfying and transparent as it has, the film doesn't compromise itself: Karin isn't forced into renouncing her identity and what she has fought for and Larry doesn't suddenly become a nice person. As the film has maintained a consistency regarding its characters and their behaviour, it is incapable of doing other than it does - the alternative would be an ending in which the couple admits that their relationship is a mistake, or in which Karin leaves her husband. Such an ending would have been rejected by the studio, the Production Code and probably the public.

In numerous respects, *Two-Faced Woman* is an audacious film. Clearly, Garbo was attempting to extend her acting range and persona with the film. A crucial issue was the critics' reluctance to accept Garbo as other than the romantic and world-weary heroine who sacrifices herself in the name of passion and love. Garbo's popular image tended to defuse the potential strength her persona embodied and which came to the forefront in *Two-Faced Woman*. In this film, Garbo is a threatening presence in that her strengths as a person aren't countered by an overriding melodramatic or romantic scenario that dooms her character's existence. *Two-Faced Woman*, with the anarchic impulses which the film takes from the screwball comedy, allows Garbo to fully assert herself and her resistance to male privilege. For the critics who had come to see the mythic Garbo, the film was undoubtedly shocking, disturbing and disappointing; their rejection of the Garbo of *Two-Faced Woman* was inevitable. It is possible, too, that the critics were reacting to what they perceived to be the studio's attempt to commercialize Garbo; or, more, likely, their dismissal of the film's Garbo was a rebellion against the studio's insistence that the 'new' Garbo would be irresistibly appealing. In any case, rather than finding the film a disservice to Garbo and a sorry end to her career, I think *Two-Faced Woman* is a fitting final film providing the essentials of what makes Garbo an extraordinary, radical persona and presence.

Perhaps *Two-Faced Woman* could never have been realized successfully within the confines of the Hollywood cinema and its generic conventions and ideological constraints. The project is highly unconventional in that the heroine doesn't fulfil the image of the 'good' woman as

she is traditionally conceived and, ultimately, the character isn't forced into relinquishing her strengths for the sake of providing an 'acceptable' narrative resolution. Additionally, the film fails to produce an acceptable male hero figure; in part, this occurs because of Douglas' charmless and stolid presence but, more fundamentally, the film completely rejects a masculinist vision.

As for the two Cukor-Garbo collaborations, *Camille* and *Two-Faced Woman* are a fascinating combination. *Camille* is a melodrama very much in keeping with Garbo's romantic heroine image; the film is taken generally to reinforce a romantic vision of heterosexual relations. But, as I have argued, *Camille* can be read as a study of a woman's destruction because of bourgeois and patriarchal values. The film provides a harsh critical perspective on the concept of romantic love and particularly on how it places the woman in a position that demands self-sacrifice. In contrast, *Two-Faced Woman* is a contemporary comedy in which Garbo isn't remotely a romantic figure; and, in fact, the film is explicit in its rejection of a love relation which places a woman in a subordinate role and functions to objectify her. In *Camille*, the thematic of woman as performer is present but it doesn't offer the heroine a means to liberate herself. In *Two-Faced Woman* the Garbo character is involved in performance, and performing leads to a broadening of her identity. On the other hand, and significantly, it doesn't help her greatly in reshaping her relationship with the man she loves. *Two-Faced Woman* illustrates clearly that the tensions between the Garbo and Douglas characters are induced in great part by gender conflicts, and the film acknowledges that the issue is cultural and social in nature by refusing to resolve the conflict on an individual basis. As with *Camille*, in *Two-Faced Woman* Cukor and Garbo aren't ironic about their heroine and her situation. The film doesn't take either a 'knowing' attitude or 'distancing' position towards its presentation of the subject.

Camille and *Two-Faced Woman* are both films which reflect the filmic identities of Cukor and Garbo. *Two-Faced Woman* has been unjustly maligned; it is a highly entertaining, intelligent and progressive film ranking with *The Awful Truth* and *The Lady Eve* as one of the great Hollywood comedies, and it is a film Cukor and Garbo should have been allowed to be proud of.



GO EAST YOUNG MAN! **JOHN SCHLESINGER'S** **MIDNIGHT COWBOY**

by James Hurst

And then he did something he'd always wanted to do from the very beginning... He put his arm around Ratso to hold him for a while... He knew this comforting wasn't doing Ratso any good. It was for himself. Because he was scared now, scared to death.

**James Leo Herlihy
*Midnight Cowboy***

Midnight Cowboy: Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman

John Schlesinger was still stinging from the colossal failure of his Thomas Hardy adaptation *Far from the Madding Crowd*, when he signed on to direct *Midnight Cowboy* for producer Jerome Hellman. *Cowboy* petrified the big studios and the changes they suggested to Schlesinger were not encouraging. One studio executive insisted that *Cowboy* would be perfect for Elvis Presley, if only made as a musical.¹ An executive at United Artists told him, "Cast Sammy Davis Jr. as Ratso Rizzo and you have a hit."² However, Schlesinger's choice for Ratso was immediately approved, at a salary of \$700,000 - Dustin Hoffman, fresh from *The Graduate*. But in his search for

a new face for the role of Joe Buck, Schlesinger had to fight off name actors ("Somehow seeing Warren Beatty fail as a hustler on Forty-Second Street would be sort of ludicrous")³ and settled on unknown Jon Voight, at a salary of \$17,000.

Schlesinger's training was first as an actor, then as a documentary filmmaker for BBC-TV. A unique confluence resulted, Schlesinger's hyper-real, documentary-like filmmaking style counterpointing the elaborately detailed performances he draws from his actors. Some believe his best work to be *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*, a literate study of three middle class Londoners tangled in the erotic web of a bisexual love triangle. Schlesinger, who came out as gay just months ago in *The Advocate*, admits that he modelled Daniel Hirsch, the gay doctor played by Peter Finch, after himself.⁴ But he also admits that though in some ways his best effort, *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* is like some "uncommercial chamber music" he knew few people would appreciate.⁵ No question, *Midnight Cowboy* is his masterpiece, a peerless piece of filmmaking that reveals an auteur at the peak of his powers. In commemoration of its twenty-fifth anniversary, *Cowboy* has been rereleased by MGM/UA.

GO EAST, YOUNG MAN

Midnight Cowboy originated as a novel in 1965, written by little known writer James Leo Herlihy. The title character is Joe Buck, a vain and dim-witted Texan who describes himself as "not a real cowboy, but a helluva stud!" Joe Buck leaves Big Springs, Texas for New York City, where he falls on hard and harder times, having only his friendship to the tubercular street urchin Ratso Rizzo to sustain him.

Joe Buck's journey is richly ironic. Where the young Eastern Americans in the nineteenth century had been urged to go West to make their fortune, Westerner Joe Buck goes East. In the nineteenth century however, there was a real frontier. In the latter half of the twentieth century there is only a consumption based market. Joe Buck, so full of ambitious drive, is like a hero written by Horatio Alger for what Christopher Lasch termed the age of diminished expectations.

Further, Lasch argues that the prostitute has replaced the salesman as the ultimate embodiment of the American spirit. "The prostitute craves adoration but scorns those who supply it, depending on others only as a hawk depends on chickens."⁶ In the film, we understand Joe Buck's motivation to become a hustler through flashbacks, and indeed they concern appearances more than anything else. We see images of Joe acting the role of town stud, being praised by his grandma Sally Buck, and mak-

ing love to his sweetheart, all underlined by her repeating with sexual adoration: "You're the only one Joe Buck, you're the only one!" Joe Buck seeks not just admiration. He wants confirmation that his self-image as stud is accurate.

When Joe invades Broadway, thinking himself irresistible to women in his cowboy hat and fringed suede jacket, he discovers that the people he attracts are not lonely women in need of a "helluva stud". He is distressed to find desperate young men, dressed just like himself, haunting the street corners and hustling gay tricks. When Ratso tells him what he must already know, that his cowboy look is "strictly for fags", he retreats behind a prominent embodiment of the frontier myth, "John Wayne! Are you trying to tell me he's a fag?"

If Joe Buck is almost a parody of the country boy coming to the city, Ratso can likewise be read as a parody of the standard Damon Runyonesque urban type - a loose change hustler, the kind of Bronx loser/dreamer who talks with a high school dropout's idea of good English. Joe Buck and Ratso can be seen as representing two halves of America, one rural South-Western, one urban North-Eastern. They are individualists prepared to die for their dreams - in a sense personifying the revolutionary principles that America turned away from.

INTERPRETATIONS...

A) Marxist:

Schlesinger, a vocal supporter of Labour in Britain, often works labour struggles, albeit almost subliminally, into his films. In *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*, England is gripped with a nation-wide strike and workers dance in the street, to the consternation of the film's bourgeois protagonists. *Marathon Man* also places labour strikes in the background, and foregrounds leftist insurrection as terrorist groups strike all about Paris, confounding Roy Scheider's spy character. In *Midnight Cowboy*, Ratso leads Joe Buck through a political demonstration, muttering the typical complaint: "Get a job!" On first blush the scene paints Ratso as a reactionary, or perhaps too street-oriented to care. But the pickets carry slogans that are too banal to be anything but a joke, like "Liberate Freedom". One wishes Joe and Ratso would see how desperately they need to protest and their rejection is ironic - pointing out how the lumpenproletariat, like Joe and Ratso, never protest and the people who do usually have no understanding of true impoverishment.

A cornerstone of Marxist philosophy is the theory of alienated labour. Marx defines man by his ability to formulate an idea, and to follow it through, realizing it in physical form. But as capitalism has progressed through industrialization and Fordism

(assembly-line capitalism) the worker has been removed further and further from the end product of her labour, hence the term "alienated labour". To liberate man, Marx proposes the universally developed individual, free to be a fisherman in the morning, housepainter in the midday, cook at night, etc. In *Midnight Cowboy*, Joe and Ratso flee from alienated labour at all costs. Critic John Simon complained that they should have opted instead for some kind of "homely but honest labour," and in so doing misses one of the important points of the film.

Cowboy opens on "Where is that Joe Buck?" repeated by different characters, most significantly the manager of the diner where Joe has been slaving as dishwasher. Joe is missing because he is packing for New York, steadfastly determined to leave dishwashing behind. And even at Joe's lowest point in New York, he watches a dishwasher at work (who uncoincidentally looks just like him) and turns away, shaking his head 'no'. Ratso as well, though he could easily make a living shining shoes, refuses to share his father's fate, getting crippled and beat-down by a lifetime of shoe-shining in subway stations.

Ratso dreams of making it to Florida, and in a comic-fantasy sequence, we see him happily assured as a recreation director for an old ladies' resort and, in a touching moment, he beats Joe Buck in a sprint down the beach, his game leg miraculously healed. They dream not of capitalist success, but of freedom. And their inability to win it, in spite of their kind-heartedness, dedication, and ambition, is not their failure but America's failure by implication.

B) As Critique of the Mass Media:

Joe Buck is led to New York by a mistaken belief in the American myth, via mass media come-ons. Until he and Ratso are forced to pawn it, Joe Buck is never without his transistor radio. On the bus from Big Springs, Joe jumps with excitement when he picks up a New York station, telling an uninterested passenger, "That's New York talkin' mam!" When the station broadcasts a report on what "today's woman wants in a man", Joe fixes his concentration on it as if hearing mysteries revealed. The women interviewed describe their perfect man in purely sexual terms, falsely encouraging Joe's sense of impending fortune as hustler. He hoots and hollers all the way into NYC.

Later, Joe sinks into alienation and despair, his dream of hustling crushed. He sits on his bed too depressed to move, watching a T.V. talk show where a designer displays a new fashion: wigs for poodles. For Joe, this display of capitalist excess adds insult to injury. Even the television is coin-operated, reminding him how oriented the city is to money, and how he is running out of it. Outside his window we can

see the Mutual of New York building, with the initials MONY lit up brightly. Throughout, Schlesinger cuts back to the MONY sign, an obvious yet effective reminder of what Joe is sorely lacking. When Joe later plays scrabble with Shirley (Brenda Vaccaro), he even uses MONY as a word, thinking that's how you spell it.

Evicted from his hotel, Joe Buck cruises 42nd Street, the only possession left to him, his transistor radio, stuck to his ear. Contrasting with what Joe sees, peep shows, homeless people, and gay hustlers, Schlesinger cuts together an audio montage of radio advertisements, the kind of come-ons that brought Joe to New York in the first place: "You need money - and we'd love to lend it to you"; "You're special - give yourself special treatment"; "Why worry about your future?"; "Take it easy - but take it!"

The onset of winter makes life in Ratso and Joe Buck's unheated tenement perilous, especially for Ratso. In a sad and funny parody of advertising's false promises, they try in vain to keep warm by dancing to a radio jingle for Florida orange juice - "Orange juice is nice, on ice..." The jingle carries over as they walk into a pawn shop to sell the radio. The jingle comes to an abrupt end when the pawn-broker turns the radio off. Joe is disconsolate.

C) Freudian - the Oedipal Drama reworked:

Cowboy was the first X-rated picture to win Academy awards, and the first studio film to touch on gay hustling and homelessness. But more than its subject matter, what provoked (and still provokes) controversy is the infamous scene where Joe Buck robs and beats an effeminate gay john, Locke. Though the violence is implicit, the beating is so shocking that it reeks of homophobia (which I will address in a moment).

But the scene is intended to be horrific, traumatizing for Joe and the audience. Some critics have acted as apologists, writing that Joe Buck merely exercises on Locke the brutality he has learned on the street. But there is something deeper at work. Locke is carefully portrayed as a "mama's boy", he even phones his mother in the middle of his date with Joe, revealing a perverse dedication. He is soft,

¹ Frank Spotnitz, "Dialogue on Film: John Schlesinger" in *American Film* (New York: January, 1991), pg. 20.

² Ibid.

³ Michael Riley, "I Both Love and Hate What I Do: Director John Schlesinger" in *Literature/Film Quarterly* (Salisbury: Spring, 1978), pg. 14.

⁴ Michelle Kort, "After Midnight" in *The Advocate* (Los Angeles: March 22, 1994), pg. 67.

⁵ American Film (New York: December, 1979), pg. 37.

⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), pg. 124.

rich, whiny, spoiled, everything the painfully broke Joe holds in contempt.

Ratso has played mother to Joe Buck, minding his clothes, teasing him, cooking for him, taking his boots off when he sleeps, and even growing jealous of his tricks. Ratso's bronchial condition deteriorates to the point where after Joe Buck finally "scores" with Shirley, he develops fatal pneumonia. Despite Joe Buck's pleas, Ratso steadfastly refuses to go into hospital, insisting that he can regain his health only in Florida. To buy the bus tickets, Joe Buck needs quick money. Hence the robbery of Locke. Despite Locke's cries for mercy, Joe beats him with a lamp, and jams a phone receiver through his teeth.

This progression can be interpreted as a loose reworking of the Oedipal drama, not meant literally but only in a vague, mythical sense. The key elements in the Oedipal drama are: A) love between mother and son; B) a threat posed to that love (by the father or the outside world); C) the removal of threat by son; D) guilt and shame felt by son.

Before he robs Locke, Joe rehearses a speech in the mirror, reestablishing for himself his bond to Ratso: "I got family godammit... I got me a sick kid on my hands... and I gotta get him South right away!" Locke refuses to give Joe more than ten dollars - though Schlesinger is careful to show Locke has a thick wad of bills in his wallet. By refusing money out of stinginess, Locke is posing as an unnecessary barrier, a threat to Joe's plan to save Ratso.

Just as a son may nurse fantasies of running away with his mother and fleeing the father/threat, Joe fantasizes with his maternal figure Ratso about escaping to Florida. New York City itself acts as a huge threat, a corruptive force symbolized to an extent by Locke. By robbing him, Joe is able to consummate the wish of escape with his maternal figure.

Joe mentions nothing about Locke to Ratso. But on the bus to Miami, Ratso asks out-of-nowhere, "You didn't kill him did you?" Joe Buck is speechless. "You've got blood on your jacket," Ratso adds, by way of explaining how he surmised what happened. Joe is overwhelmed by guilt and seemingly transforms. At a pit stop, Joe trashes his cowboy gear and buys some simple work clothes. The film breaks into a kind of idyllicism as the bus rolls into the golden state, "Where the sun keeps shinin' through the pouring rain." The affirmation is only slightly weakened by the fact that for Ratso the escape did not come in time.

HOMOPHOBIC? or HOMOEROTIC?

What Robin Wood has argued is that the gay-bashing of Locke, and scenes like it in the seventies "Buddy" films that followed, are tokens of hetero-

sexual dominance, attempts at beating down homosexual overtones ("...the function of a disclaimer - our boys are not like *that*.")⁶ But in fact Schlesinger underplayed the scene as originally written by Herlihy:

Joe swung the lamp down toward Locke's face, bringing it to a halt several inches short of contact. Locke cried out but this time in pleasure... Joe looked down and saw the evidence of the gratification Locke had received.⁷

That Locke, in Herlihy's original, is sexually gratified by his beating, brings a new level to the discussion. Perhaps it validates the interpretations of homophobia in the novel. But hopefully as a gay man, and as the interpretations above propose, Schlesinger had something else in mind.

Much has been made of the homosexual qualities in Joe Buck and Ratso's friendship. Schlesinger himself evaded the issue, at first, claiming that their "bond was nonsexual". Joe and Ratso, isolated in a condemned tenement and venturing out only to struggle for their survival, are not unlike Huck and Jim in the isolation of their raft. Theirs is a romance of brotherhood, innocent yet not without erotic implications. Of late, Schlesinger admits that, "The truth is that Ratso's use of epithets, his saying 'Faggot! Faggot!' all the time, is a sign of overprotection."⁸ When Ratso invites Joe Buck to stay with him, Joe Buck is suspicious of Ratso's motives, commenting: "You don't look like a fag," to which Ratso/Hoffman answers in an angry, guarded tone: "What's that supposed to mean?" Yet later that night, Ratso/Hoffman watches Joe Buck as he sleeps, with what careful viewing reveals to be a clearly erotic longing. In *The Advocate*, Schlesinger admits that even Joe Buck "has this erroneous image of his heterosexuality... I don't think he's openly gay but if push came to shove..."⁹

THE IDEOLOGY OF NONBINDING SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

In 1969, *Easy Rider*, *Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid*, and *Cowboy*, announced a new genre, the "buddy" film. Robin Wood has written of the socio-political underpinnings of the genre, how it works as both reaction against feminism and a kind of mourning for the loss of "home".¹⁰ Perhaps left out of the equation though is a retreat from the lines of the "sexual revolution", which *Midnight Cowboy* certainly manifests. Joe Buck's experiences with women are abortive: his initial pickup attempts are embarrassing failures, his first trick hustles him for twenty dollars, the next woman interested is actually a drag queen, and Shirley, the only "successful"

trick, has to goad Joe out of flaccidity by insinuating he's gay. Schlesinger mocks the first trick with jokey camera angles and humorous cross-cutting to television advertisements. And Joe Buck's intercourse with the hip, free-loving Shirley is almost horrific, special emphasis given to Shirley clawing Joe's back with what seems like blood-lust. If Schlesinger mocked and devalued Joe's heterosexual tricks, he certainly won no humanitarian awards for his depiction of Joe's gay experiences. Completely broke, Joe "submits" to receiving fellatio from a schoolboy in a movie theater and watches helplessly as the boy subsequently vomits in the bathroom sink. To boot, the boy does not even have money to pay him. Each sexual experience is one more in a series of dehumanizing encounters.

Midnight Cowboy was said to have begun a sexual revolution in film. Strange, given that it wholeheartedly rejects the sexual revolution's ideology of non-binding relationships. Joe comes to New York thinking prostitution will make his fortune; instead it bankrupts him of money and spirit. His platonic love for Ratso is a pleasant surprise:

And so here Joe was with this burden on his hands, responsible for the care of another person, a sickly, crippled person at that. But oddly enough, he liked the feeling it gave him. It was a curious kind of burden under which he felt lighter instead of heavier.¹¹

At a key point, Joe Buck tells Ratso that he's "only ever been good for lovin'". But through the course of his journey he finds out three things: that he is actually bad at "lovin'"; that sex is not love; and that he has woefully misconstrued his sexuality as a virtue in a city where sex is bought and sold.

HALF A LOAF

Schlesinger's films (at least the better ones, I certainly won't make claims for *The Believers*) are tragedies of unbelonging, sad stories about isolated characters struggling to make a real connection to the world. Schlesinger himself has made explicit that the common thread linking his work is what he calls the "half a loaf" theme:

Half a loaf is better than no bread. That is something I firmly believe. I think so many people have a kind of ideal... They throw the whole thing out without giving it the necessary patience and tolerance and understanding.¹²

But in *Midnight Cowboy* his protagonists do not settle for half a loaf. In the end, Joe Buck and Ratso

realize their dream of escaping New York for Florida. Joe Buck and Ratso arrive in Miami, arms wrapped around each other, determined to stake their claim in America. The problem is that Ratso is dead.



Midnight Cowboy: stealing food.

⁶ Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pg. 229.

⁷ James Leo Herlihy, *Midnight Cowboy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), pg. 233.

⁸ Anon., "On the Town" in *The New Yorker* (New York: February 2, 1994), pg. 42.

⁹ Kort, pg. 66.

¹⁰ Wood, pg. 229.

¹¹ Herlihy, pg. 243.

¹² Riley, pg. 110.

NO PLACE Like HOME

Dotti Grot Spangler



Homelessness, Identity and
Sexuality in American
Queer Cinema

BY PATRICK CROWE

Today, as soon as very early childhood is over, the house can never again be home, as it was in other epochs. This century, for all its wealth and with all its communication systems is the century of banishment... Never before our time have so many people been uprooted. Emigration, forced or chosen, across national frontiers or from village to metropolis is the quintessential experience of our time.

—John Berger

*And our faces, my heart,
brief as photos*

In his exploration of the contemporary phenomenon of displacement and the subsequent experience of spiritual homelessness, John Berger identifies the search for home as the definitive longing of the present century. His analysis outlined in *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos* introduces a framework of understanding for this notoriously intangible, infrequently studied though universally enduring mythical journey. While homelessness is, of course, a universal condition informed principally in Western culture by the myth of the Fall, recent historical events have conspired to enhance its significance.

Over the past century and a half, the imperatives of the industrial revolution have overturned millennia of relative immobility imposed on society by agriculturalism, displacing populations on an unprecedented scale and forcing individuals to adapt to a semi-nomadic existence. These mass movements are at the root of the current manifestation of homelessness that sees its most disturbing

fulfillment in the literal displacement of the inner-city homeless, though its effects are experienced at every level.

Whereas the word home originally signified the village and the sum of the individual's world, it later came to be associated with notions of domestic morality and patriotism designed to reinforce patriarchal power structures. Mircea Eliade's assertion that home in traditional cultures is founded at the heart of the real presupposes that the condition of homelessness is not simply a banishment from home but from reality itself.

Another significant parallel by-product of the industrial revolution is the contemporary lesbian and gay identity which developed along with the formation of a medical model of homosexuality in the late nineteenth century. For lesbians and gay men, the idea of home typically evokes strong emotional associations since exile from the biological family is a common rite of passage for gay people and the necessary challenge of developing alternative identities posed by this fracture is a recurring focus of attempts to define gay experience.

A classic Hollywood film evoking strong associations for many gay men, *The Wizard of Oz* owes much of its enduring popularity to its portrayal of escape from banality into a fabulous outside world and the archetypal theme of returning home. Judy Garland's canonization as a significant gay icon (her death is popularly believed to have been one of the principal precipitants of the 1969 Stonewall riots) can be traced in no small part to the role of the innocent from Kansas which she defined early on in her tragic life. Since then, Dorothy's observation, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore" has even entered popular gay phraseology where it indicates a camp acknowledgment of the end of innocence and baptism into the gay world.

The recent evolution of queer theory rejects the traditional liberal gay aesthetic promoting a nice image of gay life palatable to outsiders. This implies by extension a rejection of the traditional concept of home partly in response to the conformist panic generated by the Family Values movement. The reproductive motive commonly attributed to heterosexual practice defines the association with home in terms of ancestral origins. Queer denial of the facile relationship between reproductive sex and home founded in the biological family is a necessary step towards a reappraisal of the significance of home.

The meaning of home is one corner of a triangular interrelationship defined in addition by sexuality and identity. Evidence of this equation is found in the work of several filmmakers associated with the emerging American Queer Cinema. Todd Haynes and Gus Van Sant stand out in particular as directors whose films consistently explore issues of home as it relates to sexuality and identity. In addition, the documentary

Paris is Burning directed by Jenny Livingston, which was one of the first films to be associated with the genre, is also of particular relevance to this discussion since it depicts the efforts of a subgroup defined by dislocation to recover a sense of home founded on a common identity. These films explore, on diverse landscapes of American experience, the common theme of a search for home and the relationship between this longing and an identity marked by unconventional sexuality.

Burning Down the House: *Dottie Gets Spanked*

"Emigration, when it is not enforced at gunpoint, may of course be prompted by hope as well as desperation. For example, to the peasant son the father's traditional authority may seem more oppressively absurd than any chaos."

—John Berger
And our faces, my heart, brief as photos

An investigation of home in the films of Todd Haynes focuses on the suburban nuclear family depicted as a crucible of conformity from the low-angle perspective of its queer-identified children. In both the feature film *Poison* and his recent short drama *Dottie Gets Spanked*, Haynes represents the biological family home as a social pressure-cooker where the child-subjects are subjected to parental and societal strategies designed to enforce conventional sex-role identification and eliminate dissent. At the same time, the child's development of a pre-adolescent gay sexual identity is concretely aligned with the beginning of exile from home. This identification and disapproval of difference is initially traced to the outside world which most significantly for the child comes to include the parents as well. Haynes' rejection of the masculinist brutality by which the conforming strategies of the biological family unit are enforced is depicted in the father/son relationship dominated by the fear of corporal punishment.

The wellsprings of early sexual identification are most cogently developed in *Dottie Gets Spanked* which was produced for "TV Families", a series of made for TV films exploring the interdependent relationship between television and the contemporary American family. Based on the director's own obsessive drawings and childhood experiences in the early 60's, *Dottie Gets Spanked* depicts six-year-old Steven Gale (note the homage to Dorothy in his surname) and his fixation on campy television comedienne Dottie - a character based on Lucille Ball. Steven's interest in Dottie provokes the disgust of his increasingly distant father who is concerned with his son's inappropriate gender identification with a girl's show. The boy's pre-adolescent sexual

identity informed principally by his Dottie obsession marks him as different and in this house, the home-screen of the television set is a metaphor for sexual identification against which the characters are transposed: Steven in front of Dottie and his father in front of the football game.

At school, the girls mock Steven's interest in Dottie and denounce him as a 'feminino' though he enjoys a brief moment of popularity when he wins the opportunity to meet Dottie in a contest. At the television studio, Steven learns that his idol's on-camera personality is a fabrication. Off-camera and without her wig, Dottie resembles a frumpy housewife surrounded by effeminate men including a man in drag who acts as her stand-in. Rather than rejecting this deception, Steven is instead fascinated by Dottie's transformation though he is subsequently traumatized when he watches her receive a spanking from her character's husband during the taping of the show.

When he discovers Steven's drawing of this potentially kinky scenario, Steven's father tries to force a confrontation over Dottie and the polarized family dynamic is illustrated in an establishing shot by a chain of surveillance with father watching mother watching son watching Dottie on television. In an attempt to placate her husband, Steven's mother suggests, "What if tonight you try watching something Daddy likes watching, something the two of you can watch together?" Steven, however, stubbornly refuses to abandon his idol. In his dreams, the black and white video and canned laughter of the Dottie show are manifested in a world where Steven is king and Dottie must perform for him. In reflection of the Oedipal tensions being played out in real life, Steven the king is found guilty of killing his father and is sentenced to receive a spanking. In Steven's mind, the violent gesture becomes infused with sexuality when the muscle-bound strongman delivering the beating is revealed as Dotty in male drag. Initially the frightened child recoils from the spanking but the introduction of this androgynous sexual image linked to Dottie's camp ability to diffuse the violence of her own spanking through parody enables Steven to fetishize the violence and experience it as something he will later identify as sexual.

"I need to be disciplined by a dominant guy who is man enough to put me over his knee, pull down my pants and spank my tight, upturned bottom... Scenes really turn me on. Teacher/student, dad/son and so forth."

—Box 1710, XTC advertisement
in *XTRA!* Magazine, August 5, 1994

In his dream, Steven establishes a connection between the emergence of his subjective identity parallel to his almost certainly queer sexuality. This realization is the first step towards a self-imposed exile which

Steven literally realizes by refusing to adopt the masculinist values represented in his father's televised ideology. Responding to the dream, Steven wraps up his drawing of Dottie being spanked and buries it in the garden, symbolically acknowledging the need to conceal his sexuality though he wraps the image in aluminum foil as if to preserve it for the future. Exile is a conscious choice for Steven who is attracted to Dottie's camp sensibility and capacity for disguise which he learns to imitate out of necessity. In so doing, Steven essentially rejects the conventional definition of home founded in the biological family for a new sense of home aligned with a sexuality that he is not yet able to describe though he recognizes its emerging form and the need to disguise it.

Home Fires: Paris is Burning

"To the underprivileged, home is represented, not by a house, but by a practice or a set of practices. Everyone has his own. These practices, chosen and not imposed, offer in their repetition, transient as they may be in themselves, more permanence, more shelter than any lodging. Home is no longer a dwelling, but the untold story of a life being lived. At its most brutal, home is no more than one's name - whilst to most people one is nameless."

—John Berger
And our faces, my heart, brief as photos

The world of New York City's drag balls chronicled in the documentary *Paris is Burning* offers an urban counterpoint to Haynes' rejection of the suburban biological family through its portrayal of a community founded upon constructing a refuge out of a common sexual, racial and economic identity. The Black and Latino gay men, transvestites and transsexuals depicted in the film are marginalized by the conjunction of racism, poverty and homophobia which has led them from rejection by their biological families to the development of a unique tribal and ritualistic social practice realized in Harlem's drag balls.

The social order of the drag scene is organized around clique-based family units known as houses which provide its members with a sense of belonging summarized in one subject's explanation that "The houses started because you wanted a name." The houses appropriate signifiers of the biological family with its individual members designated as children who are presided over by a house mother and father. Named after high-fashion corporations (Saint Laurent, Armani, Chanel) or the repeat winners of ball competitions known as legends (Pepper Labeija, Hector Xtravaganza, and Willi Ninja), the houses offer a camp interpretation of the traditional family unit just as the homages

to haute couture critique the fashion industries and the exclusive world of privilege to which they cater.

The drag balls are the territory on which the reconstruction of identity independent of race and class is enacted. Walking the runway at a ball is therefore central to establishing an identity within this community. At the same time, the houses fulfill a tangible function in recreating an alternative family and a locus of identity for its frequently homeless children, the most displaced of whom are not even at home in their own bodies and long for the transformational procedures of sexual reassignment to discover their true identities.

Filmmaker Livingston's investigation of the language of the ball world is the organizing principle around which the documentary is structured and in adopting this strategy, she is faced with the curious task of assembling a definition of a community entirely concerned with defining itself. The discourse of drag with its formalized critical activities of reading and shading and the associated dance ritual of voguing mark the development of a unique culture.

The significance of the balls in defining identity for their participants is evidenced in the film's articulation of the concept of realness - the aesthetic imperative around which the competitions revolve and the basis upon which they are judged. A complex array of competitive categories ranging from Executive Realness to Butch Queen First Time in Drag Realness have evolved in order to facilitate the ball's function in representation of identity. Realness here indicates the successful construction of an illusion of normative straight appearance or the ability to blend in with straight society. Though the balls initially celebrated an outrageous camp aesthetic, the proliferation of categories has expanded the ball's critique of consumerist construction of identity with an incidental emphasis on the competitive imperative defined as normality.

The ball participants' cynical appreciation of consumerism projects the practice to its logical extension when even identity becomes a commodity based on labels and fashions. The illusory democratizing allure of consumerism is attractive to this disenfranchised subgroup which seeks to appropriate the power it is denied through imitation of the privileged. As one featured competitor, Dorian Corey explains, "It's not a take-off or a satire, it's actually being able to be this." The man competing in executive realness therefore demonstrates to his peers that he can be an executive because he looks like an executive though in objective reality his aspirations are confounded by a lack of education and opportunity.

For the children of the ball circuit, the extended family of the drag houses are repositories of the superficial signifiers of home, though arguably a significant component of this identity resides in the act of disguise. Inevitably, the film's focus on identity reinforces

the absence which the constructive activity addresses since the world of the ball circuit has little to do with choice and everything to do with a lack of choices. The houses are havens and examples of initiative in the face of adversity but not an end in themselves. At some point in the film, each of the principal subjects express their poignant desires for a normal life. The ball culture offers a model for survival based on camp activity's capacity for transcending oppression, but ultimately it does not appear to represent a solid foundation on which to construct an enduring homesite.

No Home on the Range: *My Own Private Idaho*

"There are plenty of aimless people on the road all right. People who hitchhike from kicks to kicks, restlessly, searching for something: looking for America, as Jack Kerouac put it, or looking for themselves, or looking for some relation between America and themselves."

—Tom Robbins
Even Cowgirls Get the Blues

Gus Van Sant has achieved a wider audience for his work than any other director associated with the American Queer Cinema. Van Sant's appeal to mainstream audiences relates in no small part to his self-definition as a gay director of films rather than a director of gay films. Consequently, the noticeable absence of identifiably mainstream lesbian or gay characters in his films is explained by his interest in the ambiguous sexualities of characters who commit homosexual acts while resisting the associated sexual identification.

Thematically, Van Sant's films are concerned with the interrelationship between personal, sexual and cultural identity related to a concept of home mediated by memory. His protagonists inhabit the margins of mainstream society. They are hustlers, streetkids, junkies and wanderers, all of whom he identifies with the cowboy image. Typically, they are marked by obsessions (streetkids, pharmaceutical drugs, freedom or the search for home), experience unrequited love and encounter a symbolic death in the course of their search. The construction of alternative families is explored in all his films, including his portrayal of the father/son-like relationship between Walt and Pepper in *Mala Noche*, the junkie family of *Drugstore Cowboy*, the family of street people in *My Own Private Idaho* and the cowgirl ranch in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*.

Van Sant's interest in origins is reflected in his meditations on American culture and experience through his exploration of the American film genres of the Western and Road Movie. Van Sant's ironic re-examination of the Western through iconic references to time-lapse skies, desert landscapes, western music and, of course, cowboys, is clearly approached from a

present perspective analogous to the director experiencing the frontier backwards from the west coast.

Van Sant is attracted to the western genre since its narrative of male violence presents a landscape on which the mythic definition of American masculinity is enacted. The decline of the cowboy predicated by the exhaustion of frontier precipitates the crisis of American masculinity. Van Sant's reappraisal of the mythic frontier legacy where the American intellect is fixated significantly approaches the tradition from Portland, Oregon where the historical frontier literally drops off the map. Van Sant takes advantage of this theoretical nicety to internalize the mythic frontier which he redesignates as the frontier of sexuality in which his characters operate.

The gay male fetishization of the ultra-masculine icons of the cowboy image have precipitated this community's appropriation of the leather, chaps, boots, hats as well as the associations of freedom, potent sexuality and an all-male community. The landscape proposed by the Western is a strangely appropriate territory on which to situate a discussion of the challenges facing American masculinity. In the films of Van Sant, the complex sexuality of cowboys with whom his characters are associated is a relation significantly more complex than that defined by a simple gay-straight polar opposition.

The Road Movie genre which Van Sant's films also inhabit can be construed as a form of updated western where the frontier itself has been transformed and projected onto modern America while the travellers' need to roam conflicts with their need to return home. For characters like Mike in *My Own Private Idaho*, the road has no beginning nor end and is emblematic of the cyclical and futile search for home that motivates his journey. For Mike, the absence of an automobile symbolizes his disinheritance from the conventions of the genre.

My Own Private Idaho is, in fact, Van Sant's most closely-authored text in which he most successfully develops the parallel themes of home, identity and sexuality. The film's depiction of archetypally displaced street-hustler Mike and his never-ending journey home to a mythical Idaho in search of his absent mother is established by Van Sant's juxtaposition of Mike with wildlife footage of salmon swimming upstream. The opening sequence of the film establishes Mike's solitary presence on an empty road to nowhere marked by the presence of an absurd face in the landscape. "I always know where I am by the way the road looks," he reflects. "There's not another road anywhere that looks like this road... It's one kind of place... Like someone's face. Like a fucked up face".

In Seattle and Portland, Mike works the streets and develops a loose alliance with an extended family of street-dwellers and his best friend Scott. The boy's decision to embark on a journey to Idaho to visit his

brother is motivated by Mike's obsessive need to find home. Alone, in the desert, around a campfire, Mike expresses his desire for normality to Scott. "If I had a normal family and a good upbringing, then I would have been a well-adjusted person... You know, normal. Like a mom and a dad and a dog and shit like that. Normal." This wish introduces Mike's admission that he is in love with Scott, though his attempt to establish a bond is rejected. Mike is marginalized by the paradox that permits street-hustlers like Scott to have sex with men while denying that they are gay. Scott tells Mike, "I only have sex with a guy for money... And two guys can't love each other", since he really is straight or is not prepared to accept a gay self-definition. Mike does, however, reveal the nature of his sexuality when he admits to Scott, "I could love someone even if I wasn't paid for it."

Mike's reunion with his brother who lives in a trailer ironically decorated with unclaimed examples of the tasteless family portraits that he paints for a living becomes another absurd joke when it is revealed that the brother is also Mike's father. When the brother shows Mike a postcard from their mother, the boy is fascinated by the card from the motel where his mother works, demonstrating his desperate need to invest a sense of home in any available site. "Rooms, phones, colour TV, individually controlled electric heat, combination tub and shower, game table and two reading chairs with some connecting rooms. It sounds so nice. I wouldn't mind living there", he considers before deciding to seek out his mother.

The journey to the Family Tree Motel proves to be a deadend and, in a play on words, the absent mother's trail leads to Rome - the symbolic end of the road. Mike, of course, never finds his mother, is abandoned in Italy by Scott and seeks out the only community he knows, ending up with the Roman street hustlers by the Coliseum. For Scott, the decision to leave Mike for his Italian girlfriend is his first step in re-embracing the power and privilege invested in his biological family and his legitimate role in society as the mayor's son that is his inheritance. His return to the fold carries associations of patricide since it coincides with the death of his father. Scott then symbolically kills his adopted street-father Bob by publicly rejecting the old bum, who dies of grief shortly thereafter.

Back in Portland, Mike reintegrates into the street community which grows increasingly chaotic after Bob's death. Having invested all his energy searching for his absent biological parent, Mike's other precarious alternative, the street-family, now begins to exhibit its own instability. The two visions of home implied in Scott's biological family and Mike's street family are transposed at the graveyard during the separate interments of Scott's two dead fathers. Neither of the two extremities offers a real sense of home since the former is a barren repository of power and privilege while the latter is entirely unstable.

Home Remedies

While Scott can discard his identification as a street-hustler like the cowboy hat he wears in the porn shop magazine fantasy sequence, Mike is the true lonesome cowboy left to ride off alone into the sunset. His search for home is repeatedly illustrated in a narcolepsy-inspired dreamscape punctuated by Van Sant's signature time-lapse skies suggestive of an interior, spiritual time. For Mike, it is a trance-like, contemplative state combining the enduring, naive image of an archetypal farm house interrupted by an old barn smashing to pieces in the middle of the road. In the end, Mike is back on 'his' own road with the distorted face in the landscape mocking the absurdity of his fate. Before collapsing in the middle of the road he reveals an emerging resignation to his transitory condition, suggesting that he now has no alternative except to locate home in the journey itself: "I'm a connoisseur of roads. I've been tasting roads my whole life", he concludes. "This road will never end. It probably goes all around the world."

The unconscious Mike is finally driven away by a passing motorist into an unknown destiny. The film's final image of the recurring farmhouse is followed by the title card, "Have a nice day" which advocates a detached acceptance of the absurdity of the search in echoing Scott's account of his intended destination upon leaving home. "Anywhere, anyhow, have a nice day."

As in the rest of Van Sant's films, *My Own Private Idaho* rejects the biological home without permitting its protagonists the relative stability of a gay identity as in *Dottie Gets Spanked* and *Paris is Burning*. In his most recent film, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, the character Sissy does in fact find a home with the cowgirls on the Rubber Rose Ranch and one of the few redeeming features of this severely unsuccessful adaptation of the offensively heterosexist novel is that Van Sant diverges from Tom Robbins' plot where he suggests a continuity in the female community whereas the novel has most of the cowgirls moving to Florida to be waitresses, Van Sant's variation seems to suggest that an alternative family based on choice offers some hope of founding a sustainable homesite though the balance of Van Sant's work suggests an absence of proposed solutions and a bemused resignation to absurdity. Jane Tompkin's definition of the secret message behind the western genre revealed in "a need for numbness" is a conclusion equally applicable to the western-themed films of Gus Van Sant.

"Marriage had not saved her from the sense of flux. London was but a foretaste of this nomadic civilization which is altering human nature so profoundly and throws upon personal relations a stress greater than they have ever borne before. Under cosmopolitanism, if it comes, we shall receive no help from the earth. Trees and meadows and mountains will only be a spectacle and the binding that they once exercised on character must be entrusted to love alone. May love be equal to the task!"

—E.M. Forster
Howard's End

E.M. Forster envisioned an ideal of home represented in the family house of *Howard's End* though he made it inaccessible in time, like a nostalgic mirage located just beyond the twentieth century hub. Almost a hundred years later, there appears to be no consideration of home defined as a place in the context of the queer film genre. If it exists at all in the films cited, the traditional family home is only a home in time, glimpsed briefly in Mike's possibly imaginary home-movie memories of childhood in *My Own Private Idaho*, in the nostalgic 1960s period setting of *Dottie Gets Spanked* or entirely off-screen and absent in *Paris is Burning*.

Forster lamented the disappearance of place from the lexicon of homesites since he distrusted the obvious alternative posed by a romantic love designed to reunite the displaced. Contemporary queer filmmakers seem to share Forster's cynicism, by representing love as a misguided act of desperate longing. Given the current detached aesthetic fashionable in the queer genre it is difficult to imagine love being seriously promoted as a home remedy for the spiritual condition of exile. This would be too simplistic and unstable since aligning one's entire sense of home with romantic love would resign most of us to a vicious cycle of homesites lost and found. The enduring nature of homelessness necessitates a more sustainable solution.

In the post-industrial era, the implications of homelessness are probably destined to inhabit new forms of alienation from reality. Will the electronic-commuter's so-called freedom to work at home proposed by the information revolution permit the re-establishment of a home in space or will it signal a new internal exile that is both universal and electronic, making all of us hitchhikers on the ubiquitous information highway? Or perhaps these developments will facilitate a new and virtually real understanding of home.

Recent challenges to the officially-sanctioned definition of family are only the tip of the iceberg protruding from the realm of theory into socio-political reality. Certain opponents of the recently-defeated bill that

My Own Private Idaho: River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves.



would have extended common spousal rights to same-sex couples in Ontario argued that the proposed legislation would still exclude other types of family not defined by a traditional couple. Though the motives were malicious, the conclusion is correct although it hardly represents a convincing argument for perpetuation of the status quo. The only remaining hope for constructing a meaningful sense of home is to define it at its broadest level by the alliances formed and held together by common experience and memories. The form of these alliances or families should remain an individual choice if they are to retain any profound meaning. Insofar as queers are frequently exiled from traditional families, they are perhaps better prepared to appreciate the task of imagination at hand. The unique exile of lesbian and gay people is perhaps a fortunate Fall. Homelessness is the most elusive and significant challenge facing society today and the fact that no convincing resolutions to the crisis have so far been advanced is indicative of the magnitude of this challenge.

Thanks for the assistance of David Weeks and Nancy Robinson at IVS, St. Paul, Minnesota: Dottie Gets Spanked

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Frankie & Johnny. Frankie (Michelle Pfeiffer) gets advice from her gay neighbour (Nathan Lane).



C O N T R I B U T O R S

Andrew Britton

died of AIDS on Easter Sunday of this year. His work was constructed upon his commitment to gay, feminist and socialist issues. He is irreplaceable.

Patrick Crowe

is a writer from Northern Ontario who currently makes his home in Toronto.

James Hurst

last appeared in *Cine Action* 21/22 with 'Fuck Sal's Pizza: Spike Lee and the Hip Hop Movement'. He lives in Toronto and is currently at work on two screenplays.

Richard Lippe

teaches Film Studies at Atkinson College, York University.

Cory Silverberg

has just completed his final exam as an undergraduate at York University. He is starting his graduate work in counselling psychology at O.I.S.E. in the fall.

Robin Wood

is pissed off with agents and publishers but is still persevering; he continues to work with Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, who is now a resident of Canada.

